The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR E. ASHLEY WILLS

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: Today is October 22, 2008. This is an interview with Ashley Wills. I'd like to start out with a little bit about your background. Where and when were you born?

WILLS: I was born in Jackson, Tennessee on July 7, 1949 and was raised there and in Mississippi and Georgia.

Q: What do you know about your family on your father's side?

WILLS: My father's family came from northern Georgia, mainly farming people of Scots-Irish and English descent. The Wills lived mainly in and near a little town called Jefferson, Georgia, which is about 60 miles northeast of Atlanta.

Q: On your mother's side?

WILLS: My mother's family lived in West Tennessee and again her family is mainly Scots-Irish and English and mainly farming folks.

Q: What do you know about the education of your parents?

WILLS: My father was a good student and won a scholarshiaimed at bright but poor farming ladto the Berry prep school in Gainesville, Georgia. From there, he went to Georgia Tech for a couple of years to study engineering, but WWII and marriage to my mother interrupted his studies. My mom had a high school diploma. I think she and my Dad met while he was on an electrical survey up in Tennessee..

Q: Could you tell me a bit about your early education?

WILLS: My family moved around quite a lot when I was little. My father's job as an electrical engineer took him all over the southeast. So I went to 13 schools, I think it was, from first to seventh grade, all in the south. Then we moved to Atlanta just as I began high school and luckily for me we stayed put there throughout my high school years. I graduated from North Fulton High School in Atlanta in 1967.

Q: Were there particular courses in high school that interested you?

WILLS: I was a pretty good student in high school, and my high school was then regarded as the strongest academically in Atlanta's public school system. So I took rigorous courses in math, history, French, all the sciences as I advanced in high school. I already knew I wanted to go to college by ninth grade, and to a well-regarded one at that, so I took the most demanding courses offered at my high school.

Q: Where did you go to college?

WILLS: The University of Virginia. I was accepted there and at Duke, UNC and Vanderbilt, and Virginia offered me the most financial aid, which was fortunate because I liked it the best anyway. I did pretty well there academically and was involved in lots of extracurricular stuff too, like student politics, sports, social clubs, that sort of thing. My last year there, I was invited to live on the Lawn, in a small room at the very center of Jefferson's original design for the University, and that was a big honor and a lot of fun besides.

I didn't really know what I was going to do after school. I had taken pre-med courses too but decided medicine wasn't for me. I thought I might join the Navy but the Vietnam War put me off. Then, in the fall of my last year, I happened to seen an announcement for something called the Foreign Service Exam. I really didn't know what the Foreign Service was, even though I was majoring in International Politics and Economics, but the exam was free and sounded interesting, so I took it and to my surprise passed the written part and, several months later, the oral part too.

After the oral exam, which I took the day after I graduated from Virginia, I was told I would be appointed to the FS but only after a lengthy security clearance, which would supposedly take a year. So I looked around for something to do and ended up joining VISTA, sort of a domestic peace corps, and got a job in northern Georgia teaching economics at a poor, public high school. I liked teaching, and I also coached sports a bit, but it was a year of biding my time while I waited for the FS to appoint met officially.

Q: Okay, today is the 29th of October 2008 with Ashley Wills. Ashley you came into the Foreign Service when?

WILLS: '72 October and I joined USIA. I selected USIA because in the propaganda materials about the Foreign Service that I got, of the five cones it seemed the most interesting to me. At the time I thought I was only going to join for a couple years and then come back to this country. I had never been outside the United States so I wanted to see a bit of the world but I didn't anticipate making it a career. So anyway I joined USIA in October and I think there were twelve or thirteen other junior officers in training and after about two weeks we went over to join State's A-100 class for about a month or so.

Q: How did you feel looking at your dozen or so colleagues coming into USIA? Did you feel a little bit were there more people with newspaper experience or something? Did you feel, I won't say a fish out of water, but outgunned in a way?

WILLS: I think I didn't feel outgunned, I just felt that I was the least experienced. I was only 22 I think; the average age, as I recall, was about twenty-nine or thirty. Some of them had been journalists, some of them had been university professors but the biggest number had a lot of experience outside the U.S. in one way or another and I had none so I had a lot to learn. I was pleased that I had joined what looked to be a profession; how does one define a profession? Well, it had an appeal to me because it seemed like so many people were devoted to it for all kinds of reasons.

We had the A-100 class and around that time as we neared the end the twelve or thirteen of us in USIA were asked which parts of the world we would like to serve in. I don't think we were actually given a choice about places; I indicated that I wanted to go to Eastern Europe and the Communist world because that was where the Cold War was being fought. I thought if I was going to be in USIA in an agency devoted to ideas I wanted to be where those ideas really were being challenged; I was assigned to Warsaw. I was told that I was going to go to Monterrey on the first of January or right after the first of January for a year of Polish.

It so happened at the time as I moved back up from Georgia to join the Foreign Service I renewed a relationship with a young women I had dated in college. As I mentioned, I went to the University of Virginia, which at the time was an all male institution. I dated a young woman named Gina Mancusi who was at Sweetbriar, a woman's college down the road from Charlottesville. We broke up when we graduated from college but this was a year later, she was in Philadelphia working in advertising, we began to date again and I realized it was getting pretty serious and I didn't want to go to Monterrey, California, when she was in Philadelphia. I wanted to see where this thing would go so I went in to see one of the legendary senior officers in USIA who was then the so-called area director for Eastern Europe, his name was Jock Shirley.

Q: Oh yes, he is well known.

WILLS: I said, "Jock, I don't know whether I'm going to marry this young women but I know that it will be impossible if you send me out to Monterrey." So he was a very understanding fellow and this was one of the great strengths of USIA in those days. It was a small agency and he said, "Why sure, we'll change your assignment to Bucharest and that will be six months of Romanian and it will be here at FSI and you can see where this thing goes." He had a professional reason for accommodating me, USIA didn't like the idea and State didn't either of sending single officers to the Communist world. So I think he was kind of hoping that I would get hitched. Sure enough I proposed in January and we were married in May and about four months into my Romanian Gina moved down to DC for the last two months and took Romanian herself. Again, USIA was good about that, giving her a stipend to study on her own and we went off to Romania in July of 1973.

When we got on that plane it was the first time I had ever set foot outside of the United States. For a belated honeymoon because I couldn't take one during language training we stopped for three or four days in Paris and three or four days in London and then we went to Frankfurt where we got provisions at the commissary which were shipped in to the embassy in Bucharest. Then we flew to Vienna for the last two days in the free world before going to Bucharest; we landed there in, I guess, early August of '73. The embassy was mid-sized and I would say maybe thirty officers; in USIA I think there were six or seven officers. I spent the first year or so JO (junior officer) training in USIA, which at that time was eighteen months.

The first year I moved around to various sections of USIA, the press section, the cultural section, the American cultural center which was a mile or so away. Then I spent the biggest part of that time and really the rest of my JO period as the aide to the ambassador who was a venerable and brilliant senior officer named Harry Barnes. I had a great time and he treated me very well; the DCM was Dick Viets...

Q: I've interviewed both gentlemen.

WILLS: I liked working closely with them. About that time when you finished your junior officer training, which I said was eighteen months, you usually were sent to some other place but because Romanian was an unusual language USIA tended to assign officers for a second eighteen month tour in the same place. At that time, the information officer slot was the current equivalent of a 01 in ranking.

Q: That's about the colonel level.

WILLS: The guy who had the job up until about the first year that I was there was an ex-newspaper guy, a brilliant writer. He taught me more about writing in the two or three months that we worked together than I had learned in four years in Charlottesville, Virginia, and it was just a great education. He left and a new officer came in and this new officer was not well suited to the task. Harry Barnes relied on a strong information officer. He decided he didn't want this fellow in this job and this is the way it was done in those days, he called Jock Shirley who was still the area director back in Washington and said, "I don't want this officer, I want you to promote Ashley Wills into that job." I was the most junior person in the embassy; I was manifestly under qualified but Harry got his way and I was assigned to that job. It was a great job.

Q: I want to stop there; I want to go back. You arrived in Romania in 1973?

WILLS: Uh huh.

Q: How would you describe the situation in Romania at that time as you saw it? This is your first foreign country.

WILLS: Yes, it was strange, it was shocking, it was a Communist dictatorship of the worst kind, very oppressive. Ceausescu had cultivated a reputation of being a maverick and he had defied the Soviets on a few foreign policy things. But internally he was extraordinarily orthodox and cruel. He was exporting anything that the country made that was of any quality or utility and depriving the population of basic items so that at night, there were no lights on in the city as Bucharest was a city of probably a million and a half and there were no lights at night, it was odd. Then everybody drove around in their little Dacias, which was an old Renault design from the early '50s that the Communist Romanians had bought. It was a gray and grim place. Romania as a country was gorgeous and we were able to travel outside the city as long as we notified the foreign ministry a couple days ahead. When I was an aide to Ambassador Barnes, he traveled all the time and I had to go with him so I saw a lot of the country. My Romanian was pretty good, not great, but like 3+ 3+ when I got there and it ended up being 4 or 4+ by the time I left three years later.

One thing I remember about this time when I was a junior officer that might be of interest to historians was we spent a lot of money on Voice of America broadcasts in the languages of Eastern Europe. Because my Romanian was pretty good I would do a weekly report back to VOA headquarters in Romanian about what was going on at the U.S. Embassy and it would be broadcast over VOA. But I was also in charge of monitoring VOA's signals. My wife and I lived in this little bitty apartment in a Romanian apartment building, we were the only foreigners in the building so that was quite odd, and two or three times a week I would go up to the roof with my short-wave radio and tune the various frequencies that the Voice used to broadcast in Romanian. I distinctly recall how funky and exciting it was to be up on that roof with the wind and the rain whatever the elements were tuning my short-wave radio, people don't even know what short-wave radios are today but back then it was a significant way to transmit information.

So that was what Romania was like, it was also the first few months of our marriage. We were very, very excited about being there and the embassy was small enough to be a real community and that had mainly advantages but it also had disadvantages. There were several affairs going on involving members of staff in the embassy. One guy who later got sent home was having an affair with a Romanian woman; that was very much against the rules. The wife of one of the communicators was fooling around with the economic counselor and I remember once we had a big dance party at our home and I made the mistake of venturing out onto our porch at some point in the proceedings thinking that no one was there, just to get some fresh air, and lo and behold they were fooling around outside. It was shocking to my 23-year old sensibility; but that was the way it was. We lived in isolation really within the Romanian community. We could have official dealings but we really couldn't have Romanian friends and the diplomatic community was pretty small so the U.S. embassy people tended to stay together and that, as I say, was mainly good but it did have its disadvantages.

I remember after we had been there a year I asked for leave; we wanted to go to someplace nearby; I'd saved up my money. I was making $9,200 a year when I was appointed to the Foreign Service. I mentioned earlier that we had to stop in Frankfurt to buy provisions, the only way you could buy provisions was by the case and my wife and I making $9,200 a year spent $2,000 on food before we entered Romania. It was a severe blow to our finances but we managed to recover and after a year we saved enough money to go on leave. We decided to go to Greece and Turkey and I never will forget as long as I live I mentioned that there were no lights, no advertising, no neon anywhere in Bucharest. When we landed at Athens airport in May of 1974 on our first vacation, our first time out of Romania it was so thrilling to see lights at night; to see signs, advertising signs, it was a huge thing for us.

Q: I was consul general there when you arrived.

WILLS: Oh really?

Q: I was getting ready to leave there, yeah.

WILLS: It was a wonderful place. We went to Istanbul, which remains one of my favorite cities in the world. We stayed in the famous Pierra Palas Hotel, which now has been renovated and costs a fortune but in those days even a junior FSO could afford it. So anyway the second eighteen months I was the information officer. We had a presidential visit that was a huge deal.

Q: Who was the president? That would have been Nixon.

WILLS: Well, Nixon when I got there and then he resigned and Gerald Ford became president and Ford visited Romania.

Q: How were Romanian-American relations at the time?

WILLS: Pretty good in the sense that Nixon, and later Ford, realized that Ceausescu could help the United States in a lot of ways in opening to China for example; much of that was done through Ceausescu. Kissinger would use Ceausescu who had good relations with the Chinese unlike the Russians or the Soviets. Some of the early contacts between Kissinger and Zhou En-lai were made through Ceausescu as the intermediary. He also helped us with our Middle East diplomacy; he was able to communicate effectively with Yasser Arafat. At that time we were not dealing with Arafat; later we did and Ceausescu helped us. As a trade off for using Ceausescu's good offices, we ignored what he was doing internally or didn't draw attention to it; this was before the days of human rights reports.

Q: This was Kissinger's time and his real politic was...

WILLS: Kissinger came through a couple of times as I recall, at least once, before President Ford came through. When President Ford came through, he also visited as Secretary of State so he came twice and maybe three times. So as the press attachï¿½ at the embassy I was exposed to all kinds of big events; I was not central to any of them but I was able to observe them and it was really fun. I edited the embassy's magazine, which was very well regarded in Romania; we translated it into Romanian. I learned a lot about journalism layout again, did a lot of writing. So as the press attachï¿½ unlike everybody else in the embassy I was able to deal with Romanian journalists quite a lot and my Romanian got better and better. So it was a wonderful three years.

Q: Well let's take this in order. This was your first job with USIA and you were rotated through various things. How did the various elements of USIA work appeal to you?

WILLS: I liked it but I was even then attracted to other parts of Foreign Service work as well. I liked it because we seemed to have more leeway and we weren't quite as tight and hung up as the State Department officers appeared to be, at least those who were serving in the Communist world. There was a free-spiritedness about USIA that I liked. But when I worked in the political section and the economic section I studied a lot of economics and politics in college I enjoyed the analytical work. I was pretty good at it at least I was told that I was and Ambassador Barnes and Dick Viets both encouraged me to convert to the State Department. In fact, Harry went so far as to arrange when I was coming up for reassignment for me to go back to the Department and work in the OPS Center as a watch officer but I decided I didn't want to do that. I wanted to give USIA another shot, even though I was not sure that I wanted to devote my whole professional life to that. I wanted to give it one more tour of duty in a more open society so I delayed my decision to leave the Foreign Service and sought a second assignment.

I never will forget we were first assigned to a place called Salvador Bahia in Brazil, a branch USIA post there. I would have to come back to Washington to take Portuguese and we were both really excited about that and then we got a cable saying, "Oops, we decided to close that branch post so we are going to assign you to Fez, Morocco." That seemed an exciting place as well. They told us we were going to come back and learn French and not Arabic and that was great. Then they sent us another cable saying, "Oops, we decided to close Fez as well so we are going to ask you to go to Durban, South Africa, to open a USIS branch post. That appealed to me, all three of them would have been great; the other two would have been great but this one turned out to be great. Jimmy Carter had just been elected president, this was late in 1976 and I as a Georgian was especially happy that he had been elected. I thought going to South Africa would be an exciting thing; my wife agreed and off we went. I had to learn all about the aspects of USIS work that I had never experienced before.

Q: I want to go back, keep moving you back again.

WILLS: Yeah, I want to go ahead because I don't have a long time.

Q: That's okay I'll control it. Let's talk about the press officer. I'd spent five years in Yugoslavia in the '60s and the press was turgid, I guess is the most active word one could use about them. How did you find the Romanian press and the work with them?

WILLS: To call it a press is an exaggeration, it was propaganda, all of them were instruments of Ceausescu's dictatorship and they knew it. There was no freedom of the press at all. They only wrote what they were told to write. But I could use my relationships to get them to write, at least, about the United States even if we didn't necessarily like what they wrote. I remember at one point in my tour, I was the press officer, but Harry talked with the political officer and decided to make me the human rights officer in the embassy as well. I developed a close relationship with a Romanian dissident who had come back from Paris named Paul Goma; he was a novelist. I should have mentioned that. There are so many stories that I could tell.

Q: Well do tell.

WILLS: So I became the human rights officer as well as the press officer. I met with many Romanian dissidents but Paul was one that I got especially along with, he was then about forty or forty-five. He didn't speak English so our whole relationship was in Romanian and I saw him several times. I remember the first time I saw him at his home and, of course, the Romanian authorities didn't like this at all and I knew it. The next morning I came out of the garage at the apartment building where we lived and I had a little Volkswagen bug that my wife drove but I needed a car to get back and forth to the embassy. I bought from the motor pool an old American car that had been used as an official vehicle for years and years and years. It was a 1963 Chrysler, big, heavy vehicle but it was fine for driving the three miles or so to the embassy. I came out of that garage that particular morning after I had met Paul Goma the first time and the Romanian security guys are called Securitate, the Securitate agents all seem to wear long black leather trench coats and we could identify them no matter where we went in Romania and we were all frequently followed. This car came up and cut me off as I left the driveway of the apartment building and these two Securitate guys got out and walked over to my car, knocked on the window and I rolled down the window, it was a winter day and they told me in Romanian don't ever go see Paul Goma again or else, in Romanian. I said in my then improving Romanian, "Du te in pizda matei." which is a very inelegant thing to say to a Romanian, basically it means hop up your mothers private parts. Then I said, "Fuck you," in English. They looked at me and got really huffy, got back in their car and left. I, of course, reported this to the embassy and the embassy wouldn't let me see Goma again for a couple months. But I did renew my relationship in a couple months and they never bothered me again and I don't know why.

The other interesting thing about life in Romania at that time as I say I traveled quite a lot when I was working for Harry Barnes but I also traveled a lot as the press attachï¿½. Very often, I don't want to say every trip, when you would go out to provincial towns in Romania you would have to stay in the state approved hotel and these beautiful Romanian women would seem to happen into your life some how or other. Now I, of course, was a dashing and handsome young diplomat and one could understand the great attraction these young women would have had for me [pause for laughter] but it was clear that this was not a natural organic sort of thing. These women were agents of the Securitate. That must have happened fifteen times in the eighteen months I was the press attachï¿½ at the embassy. The Romanians were kind of oafish about it; these Romanian women were clearly not seasoned agents. They knew I was twenty-three, twenty-four or twenty-five, they would have had a file on me. So they were in their first years or months as security agents and they weren't very good at it either. So it was amusing and flattering as long as you didn't let it go anywhere because it was clear they wanted you to take up their offers of romance in exchange for secret information.

Q: Did this type of liaison have any effect at the embassy? Were there any problems?

WILLS: You mean?

Q: In other words...

WILLS: The relationship with Paul Goma or with these women?

Q: No, I'm talking about with the Securitate using the honey trap or what have you?

WILLS: Well yeah, there were a couple officers who sadly succumbed to these approaches. I referred to one earlier, he was sent home. Actually both of them were sent home. The other junior economic officer fell in with a Romanian woman, one has to assume she was Securitate agent, and he was sent home as well. I would report, and I assumed everybody did, any contact like that because the security people needed to know what was going on.

Q: In a way it seems to be almost at cross-purposes as one Securitate that's how you learn to play the game in the Soviet Union. But if you are trying to make nice to the United States, which they were at the time it was to Romania's benefit to compromise diplomats is not a good way to work. I mean it just sounds like a dysfunctional policy.

WILLS: Yeah, it was self-defeating I think and yet they did it and continued to do it after I left I heard right up to the end. Ceausescu in those days, I was there from '73-'76 was brutal but he got worse and the '80s I heard were nightmarish. I mentioned he was exporting the country's wealth such as it was, mainly agricultural goods to earn hard currency so that he could industrialize, big steel factories and oil and natural gas facilities. He wanted to industrialize Romania in a hurry and as the country's resources depleted it's foreign exchange earnings declined in the '80s and he apparently became less and less generous internally and I heard from Romanian, I don't want to say I had friends but people I had known there that it was "aprï¿½s moi, le deluge," as the French say, and that is why he, unlike all the other Communist leaders who were overthrown, was taken out and shot. The anger against him...

Q: And his wife.

WILLS: ...and his wife and Goma said, that was one of the great lies I'm not quoting but paraphrasing "If you are going to tell a lie make it a big one, the bigger the lie the more it will be believed in the end." Every day I lived in Romania the Romanian press such as it was would have stories about the glorious scientific achievements of Elena Ceausescu who was a PhD. a world famous inventor. There would be stories all the time about how she had perfected a process that had eluded Western chemists one day and physicists the next. This woman was a genius of historic proportions. In fact, the woman didn't even have a high school education, it was all bullshit. She had no training as a scientist, hadn't taken science when she was in high school. This was all created as a persona by the propaganda machine; the Ceausescu's were less Communist than they were potentates. Communism was a convenience, they were dictators, they were in it for themselves. I used to drive out to the diplomatic club, as I said, everybody in the country drove these ugly polluting little Dacias and every once in a while you would hear this rumble of a car exhaust, I would hear this incredible engine coming and it was Nicu Ceausescu, the son of the president, driving one of his Ferrari's in Bucharest, Romania, Communist Romania. Here is the son, the heir apparent defying all this socialist crap and living the life of a rich playboy. I mean a Ferrari in Romania? It was incredible.

Q: He was also renown by his rapes of...

WILLS: That's the other thing I don't know if this was true but I remember when we were trying to flirt with Arafat through Ceausescu. He came to Romania several times and my associates told me that Ceausescu would routinely provide to Arafat on his visits young Romanian boys. The story was that Arafat was a pederast of the first order and Ceausescu being the cynical bastard that he was would accommodate him. Now I don't know if that was my associate defaming Arafat, I note that later, maybe a decade or fifteen years later I think for the public's benefit was married but that could have just been for show but that was another thing. Anyway, that was Romania.

Q: Well tell me, okay, you've got the president coming, President Ford. You are the public affairs officer.

WILLS: The press attachï¿½.

Q: The press attachï¿½, you know when the president travels he does not travel with just one...

WILLS: No, no, no it was the most stunning thing. Here I was...

Q: Let's talk a little bit about how you experienced this.

WILLS: This was the most amazing experience of my life up until that time because he came less than six months after I became the press attachï¿½. Remember I was at this time 24 and there was no assistant press attachï¿½, I was the guy. We were told we got this cable from Washington there will be a separate press plane with 200 and something journalists on it and each event had to be staffed, each site had to be approved by the White House advance team and press risers provided and every single event had to be scripted from beginning to end for the media. Then there were these things called pools that had to be created.

Q: Pools?

WILLS: Because most events couldn't take 200 and something journalists, only four or five. Of course, the Romanians would want to have their four or five even though calling them journalists, as I said earlier, was ludicrous that's the way they were regarded by the government. So it was an enormously complex. I worked as hard as I'd ever worked in my life up until that time and I did manual labor for a lot of years when I was in high school and summer jobs and stuff. But it managed to work and he was only there 24-hours, maybe 36-hours and I remember I was so proud when he came off the plane and Ambassador Barnes knew how hard I'd worked made a point of bringing the president over to shake my hand. My wife was standing next to me because we had to enlist the help of everybody in the embassy, including spouses. We brought in officers, I had three senior PAOs from other neighboring East European countries come in reporting to me running the press operation because we had to have somebody be the press guy at the palace, somebody at the airport, somebody at the university where the president was going to give a talk. I couldn't be everywhere so Jock Shirley sent in all these senior officers who were way more experienced to help me. Ambassador Barnes was very gracious as he always was, I met the president and the visit went off beautifully. We were all just completely exhausted after. In those days we had the advance team on the ground for two weeks before so for two weeks I was sleeping like one hour or two hours a day and working in the office getting everything organized the rest of the time.

Q: After Romania how did your wife like the Foreign Service?

WILLS: She was not in love with it. She liked Romania, she's a much more talented linguist than I am and she learned Romanian quite well; she picks up languages almost osmotically; she hangs around in a culture and begins to speak the local language. She liked that and unlike me she had traveled a bit. Her parents were prosperous and they had taken her to Europe when she was in high school and again when she was in college. So she was more sophisticated in many ways than I was insofar as travel. She liked that but the Foreign Service at that point just as I got to Romania had eliminated two things from the officer evaluation. One was the rating of the spouse and the other was a section in the report that the rated officer could not see. They both were eliminated in '71 or so and we entered in '72 so Regina wasn't rated but that was the ethos in the Foreign Service and there were several officers in the embassy who clearly wanted to include Gina in estimating my performance. She didn't like that and neither did I. But she was prepared and about half way through my tour, I guess, just as I was taking this information officer job I applied to several law schools back in the U.S. and was accepted. I remember writing the director of admissions at the two I was most serious about. I said, "I'm sorry, I applied thinking I would come but now I'm not so sure. Could you give me another year to make up my mind?" They both were gracious and said, "Yeah, we will hold your acceptance for one year," by which time we would have been in South Africa and I could make up my mind. Because in those days, as you will recall Stuart, I can't remember what the rule was but if you left the Foreign Service too quickly you would have to reimburse the State Department for travel or whatever. We had been three years in and I thought that we could go at least another year part way through an assignment in South Africa before having to make a judgment without having to pay a financial penalty. So anyway even then I was not sure I wanted to stay in it but I decided it would be worth another assignment and Gina, bless her heart, had been able to work part-time in the embassy in various jobs and the presidential visit. She worked as the acting assistant cultural officer, she worked in the visa section that was another exciting moment in my junior officer period that eighteen months. We didn't issue visas to Romanians because they couldn't travel but we had an immigrant visa operation aimed at the Jewish community.

Q: Coming out of Russia weren't they?

WILLS: No, they were Romanians.

Q: Romanians.

WILLS: Romania had a huge Jewish community and this was one of the things that Ceausescu did at our urging frankly, he slowly and grudgingly let Romania's Jews leave, even to come to the U.S., or to go to Israel. I don't know if you recall but by about 1980 or '85 the largest ethnic community in Israel's population was Romanian; it's since been surpassed by Russians first and now many Sephardic Jews from North Africa and other Southwest Asian places, Iraq. But in those days Romanians were quite numerous and I got to work on several immigrant visa cases and again that was another way to improve one's language.

Q: What was your impression I mean how did the Jews survive in Romania during the...?

WILLS: There were fewer pogroms in Romania than in most of the other East European countries but instead of shipping them to Auschwitz or Dachau the Romanian fascists in the Second World War rounded them up and put them in Romanian camps and there were many deaths there. Some were sent out but at the end of the Second World War, as I recall, Romania's Jewish population was the largest in Eastern Europe whereas before the war Poland's was much bigger and I think in what was then Czechoslovakia. But they were decimated by Hitler's evil policies and Romania's population suffered hugely but not as much.

Q: Did you buy food on the market? Were there restaurants?

WILLS: There were a few restaurants. There was a little tourism even then mainly from other European countries, the French had a long-standing relationship with Romania. There were a few state run restaurants, no private run restaurants and some of them were pretty good. I remember we got horribly sick after going to what was said to be Romania's best restaurant, run by the government. There was one international hotel, the Intercontinental, run by the American owned Intercontinental chain then. You could get a cheeseburger there, it was not very good, but you could get it. There were markets where you could get Romania produce but it was a rare thing to find really high-quality food there. There were months that would go by when you would only get one vegetable, let's say. Bread seemed to be the staple that was always available but many times what you would see when you would go to a Romanian market would be a couple of peppers and cabbage and that was it, at the farmers market. I mean it was bad and this is a country that is agriculturally very rich.

Q: Oh absolutely yeah.

WILLS: So anyway that was Romania in the Communist days.

Q: Had the policy developed or maybe it was later where there was quite a scandal that came out after the demise of the Ceausescu's of women almost being forced to have babies and that sort of thing?

WILLS: That wasn't evident when I lived there, the horror of those orphanages. I didn't see that, none of us saw that because we just weren't able to dig too deep into Romanian society. But one could see the conditions were miserable and it wouldn't have been surprising to any of us that these things were going on. One of the reasons why Ceausescu encouraged Romanian births was ethnic politics. Romania had large populations of Hungarians. Transylvania used to belong to Hungary and was given to Romania as reparations after the First World War. Transylvania also had a large German community. Most of them were against Ceausescu and at our and German urging Ceausescu slowly allowed the German minority to immigrate. The Hungarians were not really given much chance to immigrate to Hungary. Instead, Ceausescu encouraged ethnic Romanian births. The people who maybe were the most targeted when we were there were the tigani.

Q: The tigani?

WILLS: The gypsy's, the tigani. They were just treated horribly and they were also treated horribly in the Second World War. They were nearly exterminated unlike the Jew's who were persecuted but they weren't exterminated in Romania as they were elsewhere.

Q: Well then you are off to Durban in...

WILLS: In '77, no language needed because English was widely spoken and obviously neither of us had ever set foot in Africa. We stopped in Kenya on the way down but didn't get to go to the game parks; we stopped in Tanzania because the Africa department at USIA wanted me to see the real Africa before I went to South Africa. We stopped in Pretoria to meet the PAO and find out what he wanted me to do in opening this post and then we went down to Durban, which is a beautiful city. It's not as beautiful as Capetown, which is one of the most beautiful cities in the world, or one of the most magnificently located cities in the world.

Q: It certainly is handsome.

WILLS: Durban is right on the Indian Ocean and has quite steep hills that go back inland. About six months of the year it is quite hot and humid and about six months of the year it is like champagne: wonderful cool climate of low humidity and every day it is about 65 degrees. That was a wonderful assignment; that was what moved us to decide to stay in the Foreign Service; it was a Democracy if you were white. Jimmy Carter was president so our task was to develop our links with the Black community. We were perceived by the Whites particularly the Afrikaners as agents of subversion. They thought we were trying to run them out of their own country and give it to the Black majority. I got death threats there from Whites over the two years that we were assigned there. I had to do all the tasks that one does in opening the office; it's just like running a business really. I felt really thrilled to be given this chance. I had to rent space and buy furniture, hire staff, negotiate with landlords; I was only 26 or 27. So it was all really fun stuff for me. My office was in the same building as the consulate, which was on the 35th floor. My office was on the first floor, glass front; they wouldn't allow it now, too insecure. There were three other officers in the consulate; we all got along very well. As I said, my task was to promote change away from apartheid so I spent a lot of time developing relationships in the Zulu community. I learned to speak some Zulu, so did my wife. The Indian community, such as it was in South Africa; about a million strong was located mostly in Natal, Durban. So I developed good relationships with the Indian community and they were discriminated against as well but not as much as Blacks were discriminated against. We didn't have so many so called Coloreds; there were four racial groups in South Africa according to the constitution of the times. Then I would work with the White media many of whom whose leaders were sympathetic with the ANC (African National Congress).

Q: Could we talk a bit about Durban and how it stood? Pretoria is Afrikaner but where did Durban fit in?

WILLS: Durban was an English part of South Africa. There were a few Afrikaners in Durban; very few, a few more in the rural areas but it was mainly English speakers, descendants of English settlers. They were supposedly more tolerant and it really was true: these people weren't for the most part sympathetic with the Afrikaner leadership of the country. As I said, it was very modern; if you got off the plane in 1977 or earlier as we did you would have thought you were in San Diego, it was really quite advanced. South Africa, even now, but certainly then was far ahead of the rest of the continent in material terms.

We rented a house, this is a wonderful story, again the State Department trio that were there didn't really know how to deal with me because there had been no USIA operation and they didn't have, apparently, none of the three of them a lot of experience with USIS. So they let me do what I wanted to do, they were cordial and welcoming to some extent.

Q: Who was the counselor then?

WILLS: Jim Farber was his name. And because it was a small consulate we didn't have a housing office. So I went out with agents and looked for places. I found this place right up by the university in a place called the Berea, which overlooks Durban in a very beautiful neighborhood, and we rented this glorious house that had a Japanese interior garden; it was gorgeous, it had a little waterfall. It was just the two of us and it was just beautiful. The woman who rented it to us was a native of Capetown, her name was Dorothy Ryershack, an Afrikaner more of German and English decent really than of Dutch decent. She was thrilled to rent to an American consulate person. Although she lived in Capetown she visited Durban a lot and we would see her and we became friends. About two months after we had got there Dorothy called me and said, "Through a friend I've learned that a fellow who has been on Robben Island, an ANC chap, a confidant of Nelson Mandela's and someone who was convicted with Mandela of treason and put on Robben Island for 20 some years is being released and he is going to be coming back to Durban. He's a South African of Indian descent and he's going to need a job and he's been in jail all these years. Would you and Gina be interested in hiring him perhaps as a gardener?" I said, "Of course Dorothy, we need a gardener, it's your house and I can't take care of it. It's too big."

So we hired this guy named Mac Maharaj and we became very close friends of Mac's, he was a gardener in name only. What he would do was run political seminars really for Gina and me explaining to us the history of the ANC struggle against apartheid and going over the teachings of Mandela with us; Gina especially found it quite educational. She hadn't read as much of South Africa's history as I had. One Monday Mac didn't show up for work and lo and behold we read in the South African press that he had fled to Mozambique and he was actually the commander of Umkhonto we Sizwe, which is Spear of the Nation, the military wing of the ANC and he had been working at our house as a gardener for about six months until he could arrange to sneak out of South Africa and resume his role as military commander of the ANC at Mandela's request. Well we obviously lost contact with him.

Cut to ten years later and I'm on detail from USIA to, not even ten years seven years later, I have been detailed to State to be head of the South African desk in the Africa bureau and our assistant secretary Chet Crocker, our senior P DAS Frank Wisner, the office director Jeff Davidow and Secretary Shultz who had a personal interest in this South African account were musing with me about whether we should establish contact with the ANC. I'd written a bunch of memos advocating to Secretary Shultz that we open up contact with the ANC. They were musing about whether or not we should do this and if we decided to do this how could we do it. Did anybody know how we could do it? I said, "I happen to know the military commander of the ANC. He used to work for me as a gardener." Of course, jaws dropped all around the room. They agreed that we should try to establish contact with the ANC and I should try to find out how to reach Mac Maharaj. Through contacts we learned that Mac was coming to the UN, remember in those days maybe once or twice a year there would be a special session on apartheid and Mac was the ANC representative at this particular one coming up. So I was sent to New York to meet with Mac Maharaj. I walked into his hotel and rang his room and he said, "Ashley?" So he came downstairs, we embraced and we had a wonderful three or four hour chat about how he had been fooling with us about how he was going to stay in South Africa, he always knew he was leaving to return to the ANC. He took the message that we wanted to establish contact. We did in Zambia which was where the ANC had it's main base of operations and lo and behold within a year the leader of the ANC came to Washington, this is before Mandela was released, and walked into the office of the Secretary of State. I have a wonderful picture on my "me" wall of George Shultz standing there with Oliver Tambo and me, just the three of us.. Thus began the Reagan administration's relationship with a group that had been earlier regarded as a terrorist group. It led eventually to our putting pressure on the South Africans successfully to release Nelson Mandela. One does these little things in a career and things work out.

Q: That's a great story.

WILLS: Anyway we loved aspects of South Africa. It was a repellant socially for the obvious reason that there was so much discrimination and it was so organized and so ruthless. It was weird, Gina felt particular psychological pressure because we lived in a luxurious part of Durban but my work was all in the Black Townships or further out in rural Natal where the capital of the...

Q: Inkatha?

WILLS: Yeah, Inkatha.

Q: The Zulu part of Buthelezi.

WILLS: Inkatha Buthelezi.

Q: Buthelezi.

WILLS: I got to be, I would have to say, friends with Gatsha and came to admire many of his qualities. We have some great family photographs of attending social events at his residence. It was exciting and Natal is a beautiful place; there is a mountain chain there called the Drakensberg Range. You go up there and it snows, there are these fantastic military sites, I also love military history, there were two films made about the Zulu's fighting the British.

Q: Zulu and Zulu Dawn.

WILLS: Zulu and Zulu Dawn, yeah and they were about the battles of Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift, and those are both in Natal. They are not too far, maybe seventy or eighty miles from Durban. We would go out there and tour these battle fields.

Q: Is it sort of a kraal at Rorke's Drift, or has that been overlaid?

WILLS: I don't remember if it is the actual kraal or whether it's a recreation but it is there and you'd be amazed in those days you would go up there and there would be nobody.

Q: Yeah.

WILLS: And at Rorke's Drift I can't remember exactly the statistic but it was something like thirteen or fourteen Victoria's Crosses awarded, more than any other single engagement in British Colonial history.

Q: It's a wonderful movie.

WILLS: Yes it is. That is another charming story; at least I think it is charming. They made Zulu with Michael Caine back in the '60s. Zulu Dawn was made in the late '70s and I'm trying to remember I think it was Kirk Douglas?

Q: It might have been or Burt Lancaster.

WILLS: Burt Lancaster.

Q: Peter O'Toole.

WILLS: They came to Durban and we met them. A lot of the crew was American and they said, "Hey, you know you look kind of Scottish." They were going to have a scene in the movie where the Scottish guards rides up and you'll have three or four lines and we would like you to be a Scottish Guard officer." I saiif I may quote the current Republican vice presidential candidate now, Ms. Pali"you betcha." So they gave me their props, their Scottish guards uniform and the pith helmet and the red cape. They asked if I knew how to ride a horse. Of course I did having grown up in rural areas of the country. So I was all excited about this and went home and told Gina. The day approached it was two or three weeks hence and I was really looking forward to it. I'd memorized my three or four lines and developed my Scottish accent. Then I got a cable from Washington informing me that CBS Newsman Walter Cronkite is coming to Durban and wants to be escorted to meet Gatsha Buthelezi and Alan Paton, the great White writer, anti-apartheid....

Q: Father of the country and all.

WILLS: ...who had become a close friend of ours since we had arrived there. I still have my autograph copies of Cry the Beloved Country and other Paton books. It was the day of filming my segment so I had to get in touch with the producer and say, "I'm very, very sorry I can't do this. I have to escort this guy. I'll give you back the uniform." He said, "Oh, don't worry you can keep that as a keepsake." Well for years and years and years afterward I would occasionally try on that coat to make sure I could still fit in it and it fit until about ten years ago. I finally grew a little bit too thick to wear it but that would have been fun to appear in the movie, Zulu Dawn.

Q: I talked to one USIA man who was in India when they did Gandhi and they got him to play the British general who did that horrible massacre whatever it is.

WILLS: Yeah, Amritsar.

Q: Yes, and he played the British general.

WILLS: They annihilated, I can't remember how many Sikhs at that, anyway.

Q: Speaking of this TV thing a great, which was...did Shackle come out yet?

WILLS: No, no they had not. Here we were in our late twenties and blessedly we decided to start a family there, we'd been married by that time four years. Gina got pregnant and the South African doctors were great. The quality of medical care was so high, if you were White. Our doctor was of English-Jewish extraction and he delivered our son Zachary, what a wonderful, wonderful experience. But, as I said, against that was the professional preoccupation Carter was introducing the notion of human rights as an integral part of our foreign policy. I must say I had some misgivings even though I was very happy as a Georgian on chauvinistic grounds to see him as president. I was by nature not inclined to believe that human rights should be at the center of our foreign policy and I definitely didn't like lecturing other nations. He and Andrew Young, not so much Cyrus Vance who was kind of a quiet man, were forever lecturing countries less blessed than we.

Q: Ashley I would like to stop at this point because we rally haven't gotten into the situations there. You know contacts, the Inkatha Party, Buthelezi, the government there, what you were doing and the human rights thing. Were we trying to break the color barrier, there are a lot of things we want to talk about.

WILLS: Okay.

Q: Today is the third session with Ashley Wills. Today is the 6th of November 2008 and Ashley we were talking about going to South Africa and I wanted to ask you in the first place what was life like living in South Africa? You were in South Africa from when to when?

WILLS: We got there in '77 and stayed two years. All assignments in those days were just two years because the State Department felt that it was such a difficult place to live we shouldn't be there for too long. It was very stressful in a psychological way; it wasn't stressful in a physical way because we lived in a White area and it was beautiful and it was very well kept. Our house was lovely; we had a Japanese garden so our way of life was very pleasant. But my work was in the Black areas of South Africa and also the Indian areas. In Durban where I was living there weren't many so called colored, people of mixed race. In South Africa there were four racial groups that the White government had identified: Whites, Africans, Indians and Coloreds. In Natal there weren't many Colored's. The people we dealt with were Blacks and they were mainly Zulu's and also some Xhosa who were from the Eastern Cape, migrated over to Natal. In fact, one of my friends in the very earliest days of my assignment was a guy by the name of Steve Biko who was a leader of the Black Consciousness Movement. He was arrested about five months after I got there and taken in a police van from Durban to Pretoria and along the way he was beaten and died in the back of that police van. So that was the sort of thing we dealt with during business hours talking with people who were opposed to apartheid and encouraging them.

I took a lot of Zulu classes, I spent a lot of time in the Zulu townships around Durban but I also went up into KwaZulu, it was called a Zulu homeland. As we talked about last time I got to know Gatsha Buthelezi who was the leader of the Zulus, a so-called moderate. He was willing to negotiate with the government unlike members of the ANC or the Black Consciousness Movement, which Biko led. I also had a lot of friends in the labor movement. So those were the people we were dealing with during the day and their lives were much harder than the lives of White people. They had to leave the center of Durban every night and go back to their townships; they couldn't stay in town and go to dinner or whatever because their areas were outside of town. During the business day they could come in but at night it wasn't possible. But at night I would go home to this lovely home. It was a happy time for us in a way because my wife became pregnant with our first child and the quality of the medical care, which I think I mentioned in my last interview, was extremely high for Whites. So her pregnancy was well attended by the doctors. In fact, her obstetrician had the most ideal name for an obstetrician his name was Dr. Cradle.

That was all pretty good. We had a small consulate, only four officers. We were all keen sportsmen. For example, the consul general was a keen rugby player and the South Africans are very avid rugby players so he became a referee for the rugby league. Our political officer played rugby, the consular officer played I guess he was a golfer and I played baseball. The South Africans had a baseball league; it turns out that in the late 19th century when the gold rush began in South Africa lots of Americans came down there and brought with them our sport of baseball. I played some baseball at Virginia when I was a student there and thought I was pretty good and got to South Africa and to my amazement they played baseball, no one had told me that, and they had a proper league and they were very good. So that was fun.

Q: You are talking about Stephen Biko. In the first place did we at the time and sort of the rest of the world protest this and what happened?

WILLS: Yeah, we protested. At the time Jimmy Carter was the U.S. president and he had introduced a new policy toward southern Africa, South Africa in particular, emphasizing human rights. Andrew Young was the UN ambassador and he took a special interest in South Africa. We were very critical of the government and would protest whenever we could. As spokesman for the consulate I was forever being quoted about our disagreement with the government's policies. It was kind of funny because I got death threats and the death threats came from White South Africans, Afrikaners, a small number of Afrikaners who lived in Natal. They were very, very unhappy with Carter's presidency. They were racist and they didn't understand why we would favor a non-racial society or democracy giving Black people and Indians the right to vote. They would accuse us of hypocrisy; things got really heated in South Africa at that time. The White South Africans hated Jimmy Carter and Andrew Young.

Q: Now let's talk about Natal. When you say the White South Africans there were two White South Africans. There were Afrikaners and the English speakers.

WILLS: And the English speakers.

Q: How did it play out there?

WILLS: The Afrikaners tended to live on the reef it was called around Johannesburg, in Pretoria and in the Orange Free State and in the Cape Province. There were few in Natal, maybe twenty percent of the White population, the other 80 percent were descendants of English colonialists. They did have a somewhat more progressive view of racial politics; many of them were completely committed to the end of apartheid. I have many friends in this community, Whites who were descendants of English colonialists and they were working in their own quiet way to end apartheid. It was tough for them because they were not the majority in the White community or the nation as a whole and Natal was seen as peripheral to this. The key element in Natal politics was the Zulu's and as I said I spent a lot of time trying to learn their language; it is a click language. There are four clicks. I've studied five languages and Zulu is the most fun to learn because of those clicks. You have (click sound) and then (click sound) and (click sound). I'm trying to remember the fourth one. For example, you might remember, you would remember I think, a very popular singer back in the '60s and '70s named Miriam Makeba. She did a wonderful song called the Click Song; it's all about the clicks. She was a Xhosa. We spell it with an English Khosa but the K signifies a click and Zulu is the same. Zulu, Xhosa are Bantu languages but they also are unique within the group because they have these clicks. So if you wanted to ask someone how he's doing he'd say, "(click)____ _____ (click)_____" (how are you?) So it was kind of a fun language. But nearly everyone spoke English and I was studying Zulu just to show respect for their culture.

Q: During this '70ish period where did the Zulu's fit in the equation of what was going on and in the political movement?

WILLS: Well there were Zulu's in the ANC outside of South Africa fighting the government from outside. But most Zulu's followed Buthelezi and he was moderate as I said and was trying to promote a peaceful end to apartheid rather than an end to it through insurrection and war; for that he was criticized by the ANC who regarded him as a traitor. Nelson Mandela didn't regard him as a traitor and although he was in prison and obviously didn't have any contact with Buthelezi it was known that he understood what Buthelezi was trying to do even if he didn't think it was going to be productive. Mandela is a Xhosa and they are close ethnically to the Zulu's so there was an understanding, I suppose you could say. Most of the leaders of the ANC were Xhosa but there were some Zulu's, what's his name Zuma is a Zulu and had been a leader of the ANC for decades and there were others. But the Zulu's were fairly moderate; they were culturally conservative. They didn't like apartheid but they weren't at that point as a group willing to fight it.

Q: What was the attitude of both the consulate and maybe if there was a difference with the embassy about how this whole thing would end. I can remember being in intelligence and research, INR, back in the early '60s and we were dealing with the heart of Africa but the people I talked to who were dealing with southern Africa it was accepted that there would be a night of long knives. The whole thing would be a bloodbath at some point.

WILLS: Well, many people predicted that. I would say the embassy at the time, I came back to work on South Africa years later and we'll come to that at some point, I was head of the South African desk at the State Department when Chet Crocker was the assistant secretary and we were pursuing a policy called constructive endangerment. But at this time when Jimmy Carter was president I think the embassy in Pretoria, it spent six-month of the year in Pretoria and six-months of the year in Capetown, when the parliament was in session. I got the sense that the embassy and the ambassador were pretty comfortable with what President Carter and Ambassador Andrew Young were trying to do.

Our little group of four had some misgivings. It was interesting. The four of us agreed on this when we would have our private chats. Publicly we espoused the line that President Carter told us to. As I say I was in the media all the time being quoted about some horror that had just been committed like the death of Steve Biko or some others; there were events all the time, horrible events where Blacks were being persecuted or killed. But it was usually not persecution that led to death it was just discrimination just of the worse sort. But the four of us felt privately that it was not in our interest as a country to be so outspoken in favor of human rights; it was one thing to have human rights as a factor and take a principled stand but it was another to make it the centerpiece of American policy. We felt we had other interests at stake that were not being served well by President Carter's policy, economic interest, political interest, instability in the region. The Soviets were busily arming the ANC and other liberation movements. We thought we should handle that differently. I think the four of us also felt uncomfortable because of the racial history in the United States preaching when we knew our own country even in the '70s was hardly an example of racial tolerance in all respects. Obviously the laws were changed in the '60s, the voting rights act was passed and discrimination was declining. The White South Africans, especially the Afrikaners, were brutal about this. They would say, "It took you 200 years to treat your Blacks decently and they only comprise 12 percent of your population. In our case it's 75 percent of the population...or 80 percent I can't remember, (and you expect us to treat them the same way?" It was a little uncomfortable but we felt that privately, we talked about that privately, we never let on to any South African of any color that we felt this way.

Q: In your private sessions what did you think you should be doing?

WILLS: We felt we should be doing what Chet Crocker later did in the '80s which was accepting that the government was in power, there was nothing we could do short of a declaration of war and throw it out of power and we would have to deal with it and coax it and cajole it and encourage it to change rather than to condemn it all the time. President Carter and Andrew Young never acknowledged anything positive about South Africa. The government was evil, an unalloyed evil. While that was substantially true it wasn't completely true. I had spent three years in the Communist world and I thought that the human rights violations in the Communist world were just as hideous as the ones in South Africa. But we didn't draw so much attention to them as we did to this. So I, and the others, felt like we could be accused of a double standard and there was some truth in that.

Q: What about when we talk about the various tribal things, what about the White tribal thing. I don't know South Africa very well but Johannesburg is I think of having a powerful if not in numbers but in sheer financial Jewish population. What about Natal?

WILLS: Yeah, there was a small but economically strong community of South African Jews. I think I mentioned to you that I rented this lovely house that we lived in from a South African Jew and it turned out, I think I told you in a previous meeting...

Q: You can repeat it here.

WILLS: ...that she was actually working with the ANC. This woman, I can't describe to you how innocent she looked. She was about 50 or maybe even 60 years old, great big White woman who looked like everybody's grandmom. You never would have suspected that this woman was not only helping the ANC she was a member of the ANC. She was carrying out secret missions for the ANC. There were some Whites around the country who did that. Overall I would say the Jewish community at least in Natal was pushing for change but it was not supporting the actions of the ANC.

Q: Did the security forces, what were they called?

WILLS: South African Defense Force.

Q: The defense force was this an Afrikaner run thing in Natal too? I mean...

WILLS: Yeah. The officer corps was overwhelmingly Afrikaner. But it was not a presence that one encountered all the time; it was more the South African police that one would see. The defense force was really on the borders with Namibia.

Q: Okay the police, now these are the people who basically enforced it? Where did they come from in Natal? Were they...

WILLS: They were mainly Afrikaans, not English speakers, from rural parts of Natal or from the small community of Afrikaners who lived right in Durban. It was funny when I landed in South Africa, mind you I'd just come out of three years in Romania where everything was bleak and gray and oppressive, I'd never been to Africa before. We went first to Kenya and to Tanzania for brief stops so I would have an idea of what real Africa was like. Then we flew to Johannesburg and when we got off the plane in Johannesburg I was astonished. It looked like Phoenix with beautiful modern buildings and wide boulevards and a very high standard of living just as I found in Durban when we went there. But all this time we were advocating change, this very appealing material wealth was concentrated in White hands; it was built by White entrepreneurs and investors with Black labor; it was dirt cheap but that couldn't be sustained. So we were trying to do what we could to end this thing. Along the way we began to have contacts with some of the liberation movements.

I remember one time I was assigned the task of going up to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, I think there was a conference going on or something. I was asked to give a talk on what was going on in South Africa. So I flew from Durban to Jo'burg and caught a flight to Dar es Salaam via Maputo, Mozambique. The flight was overwhelmingly Black Africans and I didn't really talk to anyone until we took off from Maputo and the plane began to encounter mechanical problems in the air and it had to make a forced landing at a remote airbase in Northern Mozambique. So we got off the plane, maybe 50 people, and I was the only White. We were out in the middle of nowhere in Mozambique, there was no terminal, to get out of the sun we got under the wings and I started a conversation with a guy. It turns out he was a member of ZANU, Robert Mugabe's liberation movement that was trying to overthrow the White Rhodesian government. This man and I began to chat; it turned out that he had been to school in the United States; in fact, I think he went to Harvard and he was back working to overthrow Ian Smith's racist government in Rhodesia. It was a fascinating conversation as we sat there for hours and hours waiting for the mechanic to come and fix the plane. Eventually we took off and we stayed in touch over the following years. About three or four years later there was a settlement and Ian Smith's government left power and Robert Mugabe took over Zimbabwe. And this guy, his name was Edison Zvobgo became the defense minister of Zimbabwe and served in that capacity for many, many years. I saw him several times in Washington and around the world at various conferences. Our friendship began under a wing of an old McDonald Douglas aircraft; that would happen in Southern Africa. You would run into people who were very imminent people and you wouldn't know because they were Blacks and for most people they were invisible. In that case, I got to know this man.

Q: What was happening in the foreign investment field in your area? Was anything happening?

WILLS: There was investment in Natal from the United States but not very much. I think there were a couple of our mining companies that had invested. I'm trying to think; there was very little going on. Most of the U.S. investment in South Africa on the reef in Johannesburg in the financial sector, mining and then some of our big service companies like IBM, AT&T, Coca Cola, some of our consumer products companies.

Q: Had we started pressing for the policy of ...

WILLS: Disinvestments?

Q: What?

WILLS: Disinvestments?

Q: Well, I was thinking disinvestments one but the one was you had something there you weren't going to play by South African rules, paying better...

WILLS: Yeah, that came later that came in the '80s and I'm trying to remember the man's name.

Q: Well there was the Sullivan rule.

WILLS: Yeah, the Sullivan rules, Leon Sullivan, that came later. We were not yet at that point but we were right on the edge of it because, as I say, this was the late seventies.

Q: Were you picking up anything from...I realize you were not at the heart of business investment but Americans who came through was there the feeling of well what was the feeling about South Africa at the time?

WILLS: You mean among the private American's living there?

Q: Yeah.

WILLS: I think you would have found most of them believed that we were being unfair to the White South Africans, that we were being too harsh, that we were being too judgmental. We were applying our standards to them and they lived in a different part of the world and had a different reality they had to confront. If you think back why would an American have gone to South Africa in that period? That American would have had to be willing to put up with this sort of stuff and many of them were entirely sympathetic frankly with the apartheid approach. So there was tension with the resident Americans, between the official Americans and the private ones. One would encounter a few who felt as we did but it was not the majority but I don't want to over do that because there weren't that many American's living there at the time, at least not where I lived.

Q: Did you get any ship visits while you were there?

WILLS: No, didn't have ship visits. Its' hard to describe how lovely this place was. Six months of the year Natal was hot and humid, six months of the year it was the most perfect weather I'd ever seen in the world. Every day I'd say it was like champagne, low humidity or nearly none, a high of about 65 degrees, clear skies. Durban was right on the Indian Ocean, that's another story.

Here's a classic apartheid story. I became interested in sharks; some of the world's biggest great white sharks patrol off the coast of Natal.

Q: Oh how nice.

WILLS: Yeah, and they had, believe it or not, nets along the beach but these nets were not uninterrupted. There would be a net of maybe twenty yards and then 30 or 40 yards away from that there would be another net that was 20 yards long. So these nets were staggered and the sharks could get inside and in fact most of the sharks did and the sharks that were caught in the nets were caught on the way out not on the way in. So I volunteered for the Natal shark control board and would go out on their boats. We would look at the nets and make sure they were in good repair. It was all very exciting. Well they had four beaches in Natal. They had a beach for White folks, the biggest and most beautiful beach. They had a beach for Indians, a beach for Coloreds and then they had a beach for Africans far removed from Durban. There were nets to protect the White beach, the Indian beach and the Colored beach; there were no nets on the African beach.

Q: Oh boy.

WILLS: This was a strange place, a strange place.

Q: How did the India community fit in there at that time?

WILLS: The biggest number of Indians in South Africa lived in Durban, in Natal and they were descendents of workers who had come there during the British Raj during the 19th century to work in the sugarcane fields. Many people don't realize that Mahatma Gandhi was born in South Africa and then went back to India as an adult. They are very accomplished, lots of professionals, they tended to be lower cast Indians, very few Brahmins so they weren't hung up on caste; Brahmin's are hung up on caste more than the other castes. In Durban itself they were traders, business executives, lots of university professors. In rural Natal many of the trading posts were owned by Indians and the Zulu's didn't like the Indians at all. In fact, in all of East Africa, I don't know if it reached up to the Sudan but in East Africa there was such resentment against the Indian trading class that they were persecuted after Independence.

Q: And Idi Amin, of course, kicked them out.

WILLS: They were kicked out of I think of Uganda, Idi Amin yes; but I think in Tanzania Julius Nyerere who was a very decent sort of fellow in most respects would give these scathing speeches about Indian business people extorting poor Africans. So there was a lot of anti-Indian feeling.

Q: Of course, you know in a way one looks at this even today in Washington, DC. In what you would call the Black neighborhoods you see the small mom and pop stores are usually Koreans.

WILLS: Yes, that sort of thing.

Q: This is not a marriage made in haven they just don't get along. Also the people who live in the place have to have the small traders but the small traders want to get paid and often the people who should pay don't have the money to pay. It's a very uncomfortable relationship.

WILLS: One of my earlier interviews I mentioned I went there to open a USIS branch post. The image of the United States was what our concern was whereas in most businesses in Natal they would have only Whites in public positions; again to make a political statement I decided to hire people of color. So we opened a library and the librarian I hired didn't know a thing about librarianship but he was smart and his name was Deva Govindsamy, a Tamil. He turned out to be a wonderful employee. My senior assistant originally was a White woman because she had been there when I came there; she was an employee of the consulate. She left and I hired a Zulu to be the number two basically in this operation. All of this was so people would see Blacks, Indians in responsible positions. Everything we did in South Africa was political. I would come back to this country on leave every year we would come back and at least once they would ask me what it was like living in South Africa. I would say, "I felt like I was living on another planet." It looked outwardly like a very developed and prosperous place but everything was wrong, everything was distorted. There was a sickness when you had a society so rigidly organized according to race; it was so bizarre. As I say, the psychological pressures were the greatest I'd ever felt in a foreign posting. We were glad to leave after two years. But having said that there was so much about it that I found seductive not the racial politics but the climate. I loved the outdoors and I could go out, it was one of the most beautiful places I'd ever been in the world. You could go on hikes, they had great game parks. You would go on long safari's into the game reserves that were hundreds of thousands of acres and see white rhinos and black rhinos and lions and leopards and all kinds of antelope and gazelles, elephants, it was just amazing. Then you would go down to the coast and it was a spectacularly beautiful coast. So there was a lot about it that was so appealing and a lot about it that was disgusting.

Q: You were an information officer what about the university there? How did that fit in?

WILLS: They had a White university and an Indian university and a Zulu university.

Q: But no Black university I assume?

WILLS: Well it was a Black university but it was overwhelmingly Zulu's. I did a lot of work with all three of them; we would bring in lecturers. All our lecturers were about racial politics basically.

Q: Well this is odd.

WILLS: Or every once in a while we would have a cultural program but it was mainly hard-core politics.

Q: In the first place were there problems with the government letting people come in? I'm sure the people who came in weren't going to say you are doing a great job you Afrikaners or something like that.

WILLS: Well when we would have programs at the universities we would try to have them in. I mean the University of Durban, for example, although a White university was trying to be more open minded. So it would invite at our insistence students from the Indian University, which was nearby. The African University was farther away so when we would do programs there we would only go out there and do them; we couldn't have multi racial events there. When I would have events at our cultural center downtown I'd always have them end at a certain hour to give the African people and the Indian people a chance to get home before they would come under scrutiny by the police. Sometimes people would, as I say, come up and get very confrontational with us, with me. The other three officers didn't take part in these programs.

Q: I can understand why. That's his job.

WILLS: But sometimes people would come up and say thank you for doing this, it's a great thing. When I would have events in my home I would go out of my way to make them multi-racial. Believe it or not people would live their whole lives and not have normal social contact with a person from a different race. I had several white South Africans come to dinner at my home and meet let's say a distinguished Zulu doctor and they'd never met a Zulu professional. I could not mix Afrikaners with other races very successfully but the English speakers could come with Indians and Africans and that would be all right.

I remember once I had a dinner party for several leading Afrikaners all of them believers in apartheid. It was just my wife and I and four Afrikaner couples. At one point in the night I was struggling for conversation with these people because they are very different and I didn't speak Afrikaans; so we were doing all this in English. I found myself seated next to this very large woman who obviously had been brought up on a large farm and was not very couth but she was a sweet lady and we started talking. I said, "How many children do you have?" She said, "I have eleven." The room got quiet and I said much to my wife's horror, "Wow, you must have a hell of a uterus." My wife nearly fainted from my lack of diplomacy and the woman lit up. She was very proud that her body could have produced eleven children like this. I had complimented her and it was not a very diplomatic thing to say. But when you are struggling to make conversation you'd be surprised by what you'd end up saying some times.

Q: Did you find when lecturers would come in or things would be from America, events from America, because this is still during the '70s, life isn't perfect anytime but particularly in those days we were still really struggling with the whole racial situation. Were there difficult issues to deal with for you?

WILLS: In a way no because I grew up in the south, mainly in the rural south, and we had racial problems in our part of the country. Yet, I had grown up in a family that was very tolerant and so I had no racial hang-ups myself and had a kind of instinctive understanding of the problems that come about when people of different races, different classes, different whatever live together. In a way it was an easier assignment for me than it was for my wife who grew up in a different part of the country and really didn't understand this stuff. If you grew up in the American south at least when I grew up, you understand racial politics osmotically. It comes into your pores because it's all around you and that was the way South Africa was too. In that respect it was similar. For a long, long time people have focused on race; race was really a big deal. Now it's becoming less big.

Q: We are speaking now two days after Barack Obama has been elected to be president of the United States, which is...

WILLS: Yeah, amazing, amazing and very encouraging. Are we ready to move on from South Africa?

Q: I think so.

WILLS: I am.

Q: Okay. You left South Africa...

WILLS: I left in December of '79. We had our son there and I had wanted to move up to a more responsible position so I applied for a job as public affairs officer in Ouagadougou.

Q: Oh boy. That was the capital of?

WILLS: It was then called Upper Volta now it's called Burkina Faso, I think it is. Anyway, my wife was horrified and she didn't want to go to another difficult assignment. In fact, they came to me and said, "Would you like to go to two years of Chinese training and then go to China? Or would you like two years of Japanese and then go to Japan?" My wife said, "Let's do one of those." I said, "No, I want a more responsible position in a smaller place and I don't want to study a language for two years, for heaven's sake. I want to get a world language, one of the romance languages or German. World languages so you have some versatility in postings if you speak a world language. So we came back to this country and rented an apartment not too far from here actually and I studied French for about three months at which point my son who was then about one year old developed febrile convulsions. The State Department revoked his medical clearance and said he couldn't go to Africa; this was in June or July of 1979. So I didn't know what I was going to do, I didn't have an assignment, I was distressed obviously about my son's health. I was also distressed that his health was interfering with my ambition. So the personnel people come to me and say, "Well, we've evacuated Tehran but we're hoping that things are going to stabilize. Would you, your wife and one-year old son like to go to Iran?"

Q: In February of '79 we got most people out of there?

WILLS: Yeah and the only people there were there without families when we were asked to go. I said I would go after talking it over with my wife if they gave me at least a little language training because I knew my life could depend on speaking at least Persian or Farsi as it is also called. So they said okay and on September, right after Labor Day, it was like September 4th, 1979 I entered Persian language training 101. Was it here? I don't think this was built yet, no. It was down in Roslyn.

Q: Roslyn.

WILLS: Those were the most intense language learning days of my life because, as I say, I knew it was very important for me to speak this language and it is a difficult language. The spoken language is not so hard but the written languages they read it right to left, not the way we read left to right, and it's in the Arabic script. So I was really studying very, very hard. In the meantime I was reading in the daily news reports about how things were going from bad to worse in Tehran. They told me that they were going to give me eight weeks of Persian and that in early November I would have to finish my language training and we had to be in Tehran on November 15, 1979; my wife, my one-year old son and I. Lo and behold on November 4, 1979 the hostages were taken, the embassy was captured and believe it or not after having only two months of Persian I became one of the language officers on the task force in the State Department dealing with this crisis. I was one of the people who would have nightly conversations with the hostage-takers; I worked the night shift. I would come to work I guess at midnight and work eight hours dealing with all the issues that were before us at that time. Several times I was the person assigned the task of calling the embassy and talking to these Iranian students who had taken our fellow diplomats hostage; those were very, very awkward conversations. Meanwhile it became clear that no U.S. diplomat would be going to Tehran on an assignment any time soon so they said, "Okay, well you are not going to Tehran but how would you like to go to Afghanistan? Dari is very close to Farsi and we have a small embassy in Kabul." Just the night I went home with this offer of an assignment to talk it over with my wife was the night that Ambassador Adolph Dubbs...

Q: Spike Dubbs, yeah.

WILLS: ...was murdered in Kabul. You'll note from subsequent history how that happened but at the time we didn't know how it happened so the embassy was closed. So I thought I was going to Upper Volta and I didn't get to go, then I thought I was going to Tehran and I didn't go and then I thought I was going to Kabul for a few hours and I didn't go. I went ahead and took the Farsi language test just to see how I had done. I think it was probably my proudest linguistic moment; I got a 2 plus, 2 after eight weeks of language. Then I walked out of that classroom and I decided I'm going to forget this language and I'm never going to use it again and that's exactly what has happened. I haven't used Farsi since December 1979.

Q: I want to talk a bit about your time on the Iran Task Force. We had this situation where hostages were kept in the embassy just being moved around later. But also Bruce Laingen and...

WILLS: Have you done his oral history?

Q: Yes I have and the other man who was with him a security officer I think it was.

WILLS: I don't remember all the...

Q: I can't think but anyway what were your impressions. In the first place talking to the students did you get anywhere with them?

WILLS: You know in the early days the first few days after the hostages were taken I got the sense in talking with them that they really were students and not agents of the....

Q: Khomeini.

WILLS: Khomeini, exactly. Then something changed about a week after the hostages were taken when I would make these calls the people who would pick up the phone sounded much more politically astute, much older; they sounded older. I think that's when there was a change. Initially I think the taking of those hostages was done by young students who were idealistic and really...

Q: It was expected that this would only last...

WILLS: Only last a few days.

Q: ...a few days.

WILLS: Then Khomeini decided hey this is getting us good publicity in the Arab world and hurting the United States let's make it a long term thing. This was only a few weeks that I was doing this and then it became clear that it was going nowhere and I left the task force by early December. So my involvement there was not central it was pretty much peripheral but it was exciting for me because I was then I had just turned 30 and I was young and it was exciting and distressing. But here I was again at the end of December without an assignment. So we had been in the States at this point for about a year and believe it or not Foreign Service officers were not highly paid and living on my salary with a son in an apartment around here was killing us financially; I really wanted to get out. So I went in to see personnel and they said, "Look, there is a PAOship in the Caribbean, in Barbados. The guy who has the job now has just been kicked out by the ambassador," she didn't like him, "and hey, it's become politically important because there was a coup d'etat in one of the islands that you cover from Barbados, in Grenada. A bunch of Marxist thugs have overthrown this weird prime minister named Sir Eric Gairy." Do you remember him?

Q: This is the New Jewel people.

WILLS: The New Jewel Movement exactly. So Sir Eric Gairy who was the prime minister of this whole land of 90 thousand people and who was most famous at that point for having addressed a UN session devoted to flying saucers. He was convinced that flying saucers were real and that they were coming to the earth regularly and that there were aliens walking among us; he was a very bizarre guy. The New Jewel Movement under a guy named Maurice Bishop decided he was a laughing stock and they also were committed Marxists; they were going to start a movement of Marxism in the Caribbean. It would start in Grenada but it would spread and unite with their inspiration, Fidel Castro in Cuba. So suddenly this sleepy little embassy in Barbados became important. I agreed to the assignment and began to read about the Caribbean and learned that there were thirteen island states, each with a vote in the UN, that we covered out of the embassy in Barbados. When that coup occurred in Grenada in November 1979, just about when the hostages were taken in Iran, our embassy, I think, had seven officers, most of them consular officers, visa officers. By the time I got there at the end of January we were up to thirty some officers because Jimmy Carter was at this time getting ready to run for reelection and he didn't want to be perceived as being soft on Communism. If there was a Communist threat down in the Caribbean, by God we were going to respond with every asset the U.S. government had. Our embassy expanded greatly, our USAID mission went from zero to about fifteen officers and several million dollars. I opened a public affairs operation, they gave me two or three officers to work with me and it turned out to be a lovely assignment in most respects.

So we got to Barbados and I spent about forty percent of my time on the road. The Windward Islands were Grenada, St. Vincent, St. Lucia and Dominica. Then there were some little islands in between called the Grenadines, best scuba diving and the best snorkeling in the world is in the Grenadines, if you ever get a chance to go there. Then we also covered the Leeward Islands, which were Antigua, St. Kitts & Nevis, Barbuda and the British Virgin Islands. So I would fly in these little aircraft that would seat six people say, commercial aircraft. Here I was, I had been promoted to what is now called 0-2.

Q: It is about a major.

WILLS: No, lieutenant colonel, and then I got promoted while I was in Barbados to a 1, a colonel. By then I was only 30, 31 years old and I would go to these little islands and the prime minister of the island would want to see me, the prime minister of the country. It was pretty heady stuff and they are absolutely charming wonderful people, again overwhelmingly Black, well educated. The medical systems of the countries were pretty good and it was a very pleasant way of life and a very interesting job for me to set up a public affairs program in such a vast geographical area; but each of them was a little bitty island. Barbados was the biggest and had the biggest population; I think there were 200 thousand in Barbados; none of the others had more than 100 thousand. So these were little places. Even though there were thirty officers at this point in the embassy only five or six of us traveled a lot. So when we would go out to one of these islands we would canvas other sections of the embassy, is there any business you want me to do? The visa officers would often give me social security checks to take to American citizens who had retired.

I'll never forget as long as I live I went to an island called Anguilla off the coast of Antigua. This was basically a big beach, the whole island was a beach. There were two dives, hotels; very modest and I stayed in one of them and it had a beach bar. Having finished an arduous day of diplomatic work I went down to the beach bar about five o'clock and had a beer and I started talking to this guy. He looked a little bit like you Stu, an American guy and he was the guy...I didn't know where this guy lived but I had a social security check for him. I gave it to him when I found out that he was the guy I was looking for. We started chatting just the two of us at this little beach bar. It is so gorgeous, it's just such a beautiful place and it's just the two of us, two Americans talking. Turns out he had left the United States in 1953 and moved to Anguilla. I said, "Why did you do that?" He said, "Well, I was a screen writer in Hollywood and I became involved in the McCarthy trials. He accused me of being a Communist and asked me to rat on my friends who had been in the 1930s members of the small American Communist Party. I refused to do it and I left the United States in 1953." I was talking to him in 1981 or '82; so he had been out of the country almost thirty years and he had not been back in all those years. It was clear to me in talking to him that he really missed it, he was still an American. He had gone from writing screen plays for some quite well known...I wish I could remember his name...I came back to Barbados and looked him up. He was credited in several movies; he wrote the screenplay for a Humphrey Bogart film, I can't remember which it was, and for several other films, one of the Marx Brothers films. He was a well-known guy and there he was tending bar in Anguilla at the end of the earth. That is what you would find in the Caribbean.

I had so many amazing experiences there. I remember I was in St. Lucia waiting to get on one of these little planes to go back to Barbados. I'm sitting there at the airport, which consisted of a little block building. We would all go outside and sit outdoors under the palms and wait for the plane to come; sometimes it would be three or four hours late, sometimes it would be two or three hours early. It was very relaxed. I watched this plane in the distance, an old DC-3, maybe ten miles off when I first saw it coming in. Then I noticed it was beginning to wobble a little bit. Then I notice as it gets closer and closer that there is flame coming from one of the engines and smoke. Then I watched to my amazement and horror as that plane turns to try and come in to land at the airport where I am sitting and he doesn't make it and he crashes right before my eyes into the very end of the runway where it met the sea. There was a huge explosion and eight or ten people who are sitting there with me and I run out there. The plane is engulfed in flames. There were three Americans on that plane, all employees of a cargo company, and they were all killed. These little things that happen to you, vignettes.

I supposed the biggest thing that happened to me in that time was I became...there were two officers in the embassy who spent a lot of time in Grenada itself. Our task diplomatically was to prevent the Grenada revolution from spreading to these other islands, these twelve other islands. So we were offering scholarships, giving foreign aid, sending in speakers to talk about the evils of Marxism. Of course, I knew about them from having lived in a Communist country. So it was all very exciting but the focus was on Grenada. There were two of us; a guy named Larry Rossin, have you done his?

Q: No, but I know the name.

WILLS: And I became experts on Grenada; this will become important a little later. I went to Grenada several times; I never met Morris Bishop but I met his second in command who would later become famous at least in the Caribbean, a guy named Bernard Coard and various other people. I got to know the only remaining independent journalist in Grenada; his name was Alistair Hughes and he worked for the BBC as a stringer and he was opposed to the Morris Bishop government and the Morris Bishop government treated him horribly. We would stick up for him even though he wasn't an American citizen. I may as well complete the story here. So I finished my tour of duty, came back to the United States...

Q: This would be 1982?

WILLS: ...1983 in July, we'd had our second child while living in Barbados. My wife flew up to South Carolina where her parents had retired and our daughter, Olivia, was born while we were in Barbados. So with our two children we went back to the United States in July of 1983. I'd asked the Foreign Service, because I had found myself...we'd done a lot of programs devoted to economic issues; all these countries were poor, they were worried about their economies and I would find myself talking to the central banker of Barbados or the minister of finance in St. Lucia. I didn't know enough economics, I'd taken undergraduate economics but that was it. I needed to become more literate in economics; so I asked the Foreign Service if I could go back and get a masters degree in economics. We have this series of schools where we sent officers and they asked me if I'd like to go to Harvard, or Stanford, or Johns Hopkins or Georgetown. I said I didn't want to go to any university outside the DC area because I didn't want to have to go one place for a year and then move back to Washington. I knew I had a U.S. tour of duty coming and I wanted to stay in one place for the stability of our family so they sent me to Johns Hopkins; so I started the Hopkins program. The Hopkins program said, "Do you have calculus?" I'd taken calculus in college and they said that's not good enough that was fifteen years ago; you have to take calculus all over again. There is a special two-week course in late August before all the other graduate students reported. I was taking a special calculus course being a student again but it was great because unlike my undergraduate education, which I had to pay for, the State Department was paying and paying my salary at the same so it was great.

I got about a month into the program and in late September 1983 I got a call from a friend of mine. I never will forget it; it was a Sunday afternoon. We had bought a house out in Vienna, Virginia. There was a Redskins game on and there I sat on the couch with my two little kids watching the Redskins game and I get this call from this friend whom I had known when I lived in Barbados. I had noticed in the media that there had been stories about political unrest in Grenada and that things were not going well. Then I read that Bernard Coard, the man I knew, had got into a disagreement with Morris Bishop, the prime minister and shot and killed him along with three or four other people who were close to Bishop. Coard who was regarded as a real hardliner and the real Castroite was now going to run Grenada. Ronald Reagan, then the president, didn't like the idea of having another Marxist country in our hemisphere. We had at that time a convoy of Navy ships on its way to Lebanon from Norfolk. This is when the bombing of the....

Q: Embassy...Marine barracks.

Wills: The Marine barracks, the Marine barracks occurred in Beirut and 200 or something Marines were killed. So this convoy was on its way to Lebanon to evacuate American citizens. At the same time Bernard Coard staged a second coup in Grenada. So the president decided we aren't going to stand for that we are going to divert that fleet to Grenada and see what we can do to put things right there. The ostensible reason for the invasion was that there was a small American medical school located in Grenada called the St. Georges Medial School. This was not really true but there were published reports that these American citizens were in danger somehow. So there was a decision made to invade Grenada. The call that I got at my home that afternoon was from this friend; they needed a political advisor for this invasion. Larry Rossin and I were the two Grenada experts in the government. I can't remember where Larry was. So this guy on the phone said, "there will be an unmarked car in front of your house in two hours. You need to pack for a tropical experience" and that is all he said. I, of course, put two and two together and said we are going to do something in Grenada. Sure enough they picked me up and drove me to Andrews Air Force Base and then put me on a chopper and flew me down to Norfolk where Admiral Joseph Metcalf who was the commander of this squadron of ships was waiting to receive his orders from the White House about an invasion of Grenada. Suddenly I found myself in the space of a few hours going from sitting on a couch watching a Redskins game to briefing the battle staff for an invasion force. There were probably 100 military officers in this room; they wanted to know all about Grenada, where there might be good landing points for Marines. There were two airports; one was being built by the Cubans as a gift to the Grenadian people. The old airport was on the other side of the island and could we land there with helicopters? Who were the bad guys and where would we find them in Grenada? Where were their hideouts and all this stuff? Then about midnight Metcalf and I got on a jet plane and flew to Barbados, then got on a helicopter and went to the helicopter carrier, the Guam, just off Grenada.

Q: The Guam is a helicopter carrier.

WILLS: We got there about three in the morning and the invasion was scheduled to begin at five or six in the morning, I can't remember which. So I had to brief the staff again about where to go. We were making decisions about where to land forces less than two hours before the invasion was going to happen.

Q: Did you have anything to draw on outside of your experience in the field?

WILLS: I had nobody. It was amazing because, well there were so many amazing things that happened in those seven days that I was there. We dispatched, I never will forget, a team of Navy Seals; we actually had three teams of seals and we were trying to preposition them in St. George's itself so our invasion force could meet up with them and they could do some recon and we could figure out where Bernard Coard was and other leaders of the government were. All of the members of one of those seal teams drowned that very morning, my God! Also keep in mind there were Cuban military forces on the island. We didn't know how many, we didn't know where, so it was an invasion done without any planning at all. I remember we had an amazing battle staff; Admiral Joseph Metcalf was the commander. The army commander reporting to him was Normal Schwarzkopf, who later became famous during the first Gulf War. The Air Force commander, he also became chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff later on, what the hell was his name. So it was a very distinguished group and me, totally inexperienced in military matters other than being in Naval ROTC in college.

So I asked the Marine commander at one point just before the invasion whether there was something I could do to help and he said, "Yeah, we're going to invade. We're going to land troops at the old airport why don't you come along." So we took a speedboat around the island and joined up with the amphibious force that landed at the old Grenadian airport. We came ashore, there were Cuban troops, and we were shot at. It was the first time in my life that I had ever been shot at. I was there in civilian clothes and the Cuban troops and the Grenadian troops who were there figured if you are in civilian clothes you must be CIA; you must, therefore be unfriendly and we need to kill you; so they kept shooting at me. It was very eye opening. Was it Churchill who said, "You never feel so alive as when someone shoots at you and misses." That's what happened that morning.

It turned out after we had secured that airport, it took about an hour and a half, only a few of the Cuban and Grenadian troops were killed, the rest were captured. They flew me back to the Guam because they hadn't found Coard on the other side of the island and Metcalf wanted another meeting of the battle staff. So I went back. It was at that point about four hours into this action that we lost all communication with Washington. I don't know if you remember this or not.

Q: I've heard the story.

WILLS: Here we have all of this money invested in military hardware and ships and fancy communications and we lost touch with Washington for I want to say it was twelve or fourteen hours. It was a long time. From that point forward we winged it; I went ashore in St. Georges. One of my missions was to find this guy this journalist I befriended, Alistair Hughes. It turns out he was in prison. Bishop had thrown him in prison for being an independent journalist and when the invasion began, I didn't know this at the time, the guards at the prison opened all the cells and let everybody out. So Alistair Hughes walked back to his house, which I knew well but I first went looking for him at the prison and they gave me two squads of Marines. We set off in jeeps driving along as though this was the beach in Miami and we get into another gunfight. There is a Cuban contingent in I guess it was the military attachï¿½'s house and they started shooting at us as we are on our way to the prison and the Marines killed them all.

Meanwhile we have helicopters falling out of the sky. Remember the first day we lost five or six Americans; one of these was one of the three teams of Seals? Five, all had drowned that first morning because we didn't know that the place where we had wanted to insert them had horrific undercurrents and these incredibly well prepared athletic guys went in underwater and all drowned before they ever reached the shore. So there were all kinds of things and meanwhile we had no contact with Washington so we couldn't ask for any guidance; we were doing this all on our own. So I went to the prison and the prison was empty. We came back and we've got to find this guy, Alistair Hughes, and I thought maybe he is at his house. So we went roaring off, our little convoy of six or seven jeeps, I went up to his door and tapped on his door and there he was. He was shocked, "What are you doing here?" I said, "We need you to come out with us because the rest of the world, I don't know if you remember that first day or so the rest of the world was horrified that we had invaded little Grenada.

Q: And the Brits were mad as hell. And Maggie Thatcher...

WILLS: And the Brits were and Maggie Thatcher was mad as hell. I knew if we could get Alistair Hughes out who was this venerable journalist and get him in front of the media back in Barbados explaining that what we were doing was justified that all would be well; that indeed was what happened. We flew him back to the ship, I had communication with Barbados, we set up a press conference, we used an American chopper to fly him back to Barbados and he address the international media of whom by this point there were hundreds in Barbados trying to get to Grenada to see what we were doing. Hughes, bless his heart, stood up before them and said, "The Americans have overthrown an evil government. These guys were Marxist thugs and they were running this country in a very dictatorial manner and it's a good thing that they've come." Then the international furor died away. After a week of rounding up the bad guys we went off all over the island finding out where their hideouts were. I said to Admiral Metcalf, "I think it's time for me to go back to Vienna, Virginia, and become a regular person again. He said, "Yes, okay." So they flew me back in a military jet. In the meanwhile I had collected a trophy. One of the guys who had been shooting at us with a Soviet AK-47 had been killed and the Marine officer who had led military action on that little engagement gave me the AK-47 as a war trophy. I thought wow this is cool so I asked Admiral Metcalf how I could get that gun back in the United States. He said, "Well they aren't legal in the United States but we have a bunch of those trophies and we are going to decommission them and throw them in my jet when this is all over with and I'll fly them back to the United States. We will put your name on yours and you can collect it at Andrews Air Force Base." I don't know if you remember what happened but Joe Metcalf had three stars and was up for four stars; he landed at Andrews Air Force Base a week or two later and there were agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, Firearms and Tobacco waiting for him because somebody on his staff had tipped off these folks that we were bringing in war trophies which were illegal in the U.S. There was a big scandal and they confiscated twenty some AK-47s on that plane, one of them was mine, and they confiscated them, denied him his promotion to four stars, reduced him in rank to two stars and retired him from the U.S. Navy within a month or two. He thought he was coming back to this glorious career promotion perhaps to Chief of Naval Operations. Instead, he was humiliated and run out of the U.S. Navy all because he had those weapons aboard his plane. So I never got my AK-47.

Q: What happened to the school?

WILLS: Well that's an interesting story too. As I said, the ostensible reason for the whole thing was that these students were in trouble, in danger. I thought there was only one campus, there was the campus I'd visited a dozen times in the past when I had been on visits to Grenada to check on their welfare. We went there that first day in the afternoon and it was empty. Only then I think it was Rossin who said, "Wait a minute there is a second campus as well." The next day, I guess it was a Tuesday, we had reestablished connections to Washington, I guess we had done some consulting I don't remember exactly how we found out; I thought it was Rossin but maybe it wasn't. But anyway, we learned that there was a second campus. We went to the second campus and that is where all the students were. We collected them all and flew them out to the Guam and then flew them back to Barbados and the United States; about forty students as I recall.

Q: Well I don't know if you had a hand in it or not but I can remember vividly as most did when the first student got off the plane, got down and kissed the soil.

WILLS: Yeah that's right.

Q: Because there had been talk about whether they were fine, but they had no problem and they...

WILLS: But they heard all the shooting going on and they were scared but nobody ever made a move against them.

Q: But the thing was I think there had been anticipation saying, "Well the United States shouldn't have done this and the students will come out and say, what's the matter we were just having a good time," or something like that. But when the student got down and kissed the soil when he got off the plane...

WILLS: Then everybody knew.

Q: It really changed everything.

WILLS: Yeah, it changed everything. I remember that first day was the longest day of my life because I hadn't slept since Saturday night in my home. But the adrenaline was running. We knew that Bernard Coard had captured the governor general of Grenada, this venerable old judge and we needed the Governor-General's permission nominally to carry out this military action but he was under house arrest at his residence. So Rossin flew in from Barbados on an American military chopper, took a lot of fire, the underside of those Huey's is armored and thank goodness they were because here is Larry Rossin hearing this ping, ping, ping, ping, ping off the bottom of his helicopter. Mind you we had invaded at six o'clock in the morning and this was about five o'clock in the afternoon and Larry Rossin flies in with a letter to the Governor-General's residence. He and a squad of Marines go into the governor-general's residence and liberate him and ask him to sign this letter we drafted giving us permission to invade his country eight hours after we had already commenced operations. So there were all kinds of bizarre little moments like that.

Q: OK, I'm looking at the time. It's probably a good place to stop and we will pick this up next time.

WILLS: So we'll go beyond Barbados next time.

Q: Okay, I will ask did you get any debriefing or anything like that?

WILLS: When I came back? Oh yeah. I briefed at the NSC, I briefed at the CIA, I briefed at DOD.

Q: Well we'll talk a bit about how when you got back after this operation how things were viewed.

WILLS: Yeah, and they gave Rossin and me awards; it was quite an amazing experience.

Q: Okay, today is the 17th of November 2008 with Ashley Wills. Ashley, you came back from Grenada when?

WILLS: Well I came back about ten days after the military operation began. It ended four or five days after it began and I spent three or four days helping the military situate itself for a very short occupation. Then I flew back and resumed my university year at Johns Hopkins SAIS. I did a masters degree in public affairs and my field was international economics. So I did that until the following summer; the summer of 1984 when I was asked to be deputy director of the office of international visitors in USIA. The office director was a Schedule C, a very sweet and smart man who was a bit of an ideologue but in a gentle sort of way.

Q: How are you an ideologue in that, how did it present itself in that position?

WILLS: You recall that Ronald Reagan was president and the government had undergone a major change from the Carter administration to the Reagan one. People were brought in who had no previous experience in government but who were loyal Republicans. Charles Wick was then the director of USIA. He had maybe fifteen or twenty people in political jobs and this guy, Bob Shadler by name, was running the office of international visitors, which was one of the best programs USIA had.

Q: It always has been.

WILLS: It always has been. I was there just one year. I enjoyed it very much and I initiated some changes in the way the programs were evaluated and budgets calculated. I enjoyed working with the civil servants who were very talented and very committed to the program. Then about five months or so into the year, actually the way it happened I was coming up at the end of my university year on a period when I would be reassigned. One of the fellows I'd worked with in South Africa, by the name of Ed Fugit, was departing his assignment as head of the South Africa desk in the State Department. He asked me whether I would like to succeed him and I said, "I surely would," because our policy, as you recall, I had some misgivings about Jimmy Carter's policy toward South Africa and I liked very much what Chet Crocker, then the Assistant Secretary under Reagan was doing. It was something called constructive engagement. Although I'd joined USIA, as I think I'd mentioned early in our conversations, Stu at the time I thought I would just do it for a tour or two and USIA sounded to me like a fun place to work. But as I got into the career I realized that my interests were broad and not confined to public affairs work and I wanted flexibility. I wanted to be able to move around and try different things. The experience in Grenada had been an exhilarating one and being political advisor brought out skills and inclinations in me that I didn't even know were there. So when Ed talked to me about the job, he wasn't in a position to offer it, I expressed interest but I knew that USIA's personnel people wouldn't be very keen. They were not as interested in officers taking secondments over at State as I thought they should be. So I went to see the personnel people and they were cool but they didn't say flat out no. So I went to interview with the principal DAS, the PDAS Frank Wisner. We hit it off and a week or so later he called me and said he would like to offer me the job but State personnel was objecting to my coming over because it was an O-1 political officer's job. There was an O-1 political officer with Africa experience who wanted it. Frank told me that he personally had some misgivings about this other candidate but he was not in a position to roll personnel and so I didn't get the job and that's when I took the job as deputy director of EV, it was called, the IV program.

About six months into that year when I was at USIA, I got a call from Wisner who told me that the officer who had come in the previous summer was not working out and Chet Crocker didn't have confidence in him and would I be willing to come over and take the job that spring; this was in January or so, he wanted me in March, I think it was. I said well I would have to talk with USIS personnel but I would be interested even though I really like this job in EV, it was a managerial job we had a huge budget and it was fun fooling around with all that money and meeting with all those international visitors. But I had this other interest as well, policy interest. So I went to personnel, the head of Foreign Service personnel in USIA. The position had changed in the intervening six months and a new person was in the job. He was unambiguously hostile to the idea and told me in very blunt terms that if I took this job at State my career in USIA was over with. He was really very ugly about it. I will not name this officer.

Q: Well what did you think? I mean was this?

WILLS: There was a lot of enmity for some reason. I couldn't...

Q: Was he a regular USIA?

WILLS: He had been an FSO for a few years and then converted to the civil service and he was head of USIA personnel not just Foreign Service personnel. Anyway that conversation angered me. I didn't think it was right of him to make career decisions for me and I underlined that I was only going to take it as an excursion tour. I was coming back to USIA; for some reason he doubted me. Anyway, I called up Wisner and said this guy was not very pleasant about it but he said he would not block it if I insisted. So Wisner went to personnel in State, the deal was done and I left my job in EV in March or April, I can't remember when it was in 1985 and went over to run the South Africa desk.

Q: Before we move to that during this time that you were both at SAIS after Grenada and in USIA Visitor Visa program were you called upon or observing developments in Grenada at all?

WILLS: Not very much. Once it was clear that Bernard Coard who led the insurrection against Maurice Bishop was in custody and would pay for his crimes, including murder, and that the country was returning to its democratic ways, it had been a democracy for a long time since independence after the Second World War, I knew that I would never return to the Caribbean. So I didn't focus on it very much except to see that things were going pretty well. Although not as much as one would have hoped, our developmental aid was not as generous as it should have been and so on. But anyway I went over to State. We had, I think, five officers on the desk. We had a wonderful crew of people in that office of Southern African Affairs. The first office director was a guy named Bob Gelbard who is very talented and a little irascible but he left after just two months. I only overlapped with him two months because he was made a DAS in the South American ARA, whatever it's called, WHA. Then Jeff Davidow came in as the new office director. We had a guy named Tex Harris as the deputy office director.

Q: Whom I've interviewed.

WILLS: As I say four or five of us on the South Africa desk and we all worked extremely hard, long hours. We did more press guidance's, I was told, than any other desk in the State Department including the Israeli desk for the two and a half years or so that I was in that job.

Q: You were there from when to when?

WILLS: It would have been I think, March of '85 until the summer of '87.

Q: Before we move on, when you got there how long had constructive engagement or at least the policy towards looking at South Africa been in place and what was the spirit both within the bureau and in your office? Also, this is a very controversial thing.

WILLS: Yes it was.

Q: What were you getting from outside?

WILLS: We got a lot of criticism from outside. In fact, one of the reasons I was attracted to the policy was because Crocker believed not only that we should engage with South Africa, the White leadership, but that we should also engage with the region's Black leaders, some of whom were committed Marxists, and try to draw them into constructive relations with the United States. Crocker, even though he wasn't a career diplomat, he had wonderful diplomatic instincts. He believed, as I do, that it doesn't serve the U.S. well to ostracize governments or to make moral judgments to the point where we are rigid. We always have to make moral judgment about regimes and leaders and so forth but we can also restrain ourselves and deal with these people. So he was trying to draw Samora Machel, a Marxist in Mozambique, toward us. He was trying to draw Bobby Mugabe, who has since become an irredeemable ass-hole but in those days he was negotiable. Kenneth Kaunda was a committed socialist in Zambia, constructive engagement was aimed at him as well and it was also aimed at South Africa. So we were getting criticism from the left for dealing with South Africa, we were getting criticism from the right, Jesse Helms being the leading critic, for dealing with Samora Machel. Senator Helms thought that was unconscionable. We had very high morale in the bureau because we thought if we are getting whacked from both ends we must be doing something right. So it was a very happy and hard-working office.

Q: Were you getting anything from your Foreign Service colleagues and USIA colleagues not in that happy crew but elsewhere?

WILLS: Yeah, my first ambassador in the Foreign Service and one of my heroes was Harry Barnes. Harry who was then ambassador to India came back a couple times and we had coffee. He was very skeptical; a lot of my Black friends were deeply suspicious, most of them but some of them understood what we were trying to do.

The way the public affairs bureau at State was set up in the day, I don't know if it still is, people who were desk officers or office directors with controversial policies would be asked to go out and speak. Most of the time we were too busy to do it; as I said most of the time we were working killing hours. But occasionally just to get out of the office I would accept speaking engagements. I remember once going to William and Mary to speak, another time I went to the University of Massachusetts consortium. In those appearances very often there would be protestors, people carrying placards trying to make our South Africa policy out as immoral and to make it as public an issue as opposition to the Viet Nam War had been when I was in university. I remember once when I was at the University of Massachusetts there was a debate between a leading Black American scholar, Roger Williams; he since has gone to George Mason and become a professor there, and me. The crowd of three thousand people in this gymnasium and this professor, my debating opponent, began his opening statement with the following sentence: "I don't know Ashley Wills but he must be a racist." That caused the crowd to erupt, "...because he's carrying out the policy of constructive engagement." It was not a very gentlemanly way to begin a debate and it turned out he really was a gentleman but he was also deeply upset by what we were doing and thought it was serving the apartheid regime's interest more than it was serving ours. But I insisted that those of us who were implementing the policy, devising it as it went along as it always happens in the State Department, we were committed to the end of apartheid and didn't feel we were racist at all. In fact, we thought we were doing a service to the Black people of South Africa. So I felt, even though people would attack quite confident about what I was doing. It was in some ways the happiest I've ever been professionally because we had a cause; we felt it was noble, we felt it had applications beyond southern Africa. We thought American diplomacy, as a whole would be served well by adopting constructive engagement toward countries we didn't agree with such as Cuba, for example, or North Korea or Iran or any of several other countries. So that was the approach, the philosophy behind it.

Q: There is this peculiarity which has always bothered me just the plain diplomatic approach that the worse relations get the more likelier you are to pull out your top diplomat, your ambassador, just when you should have the top person there.

WILLS: Exactly.

Q: I mean it's not talking. It's counterproductive and nuts!

WILLS: It is, I think it is. I think it is a very bad idea and my own experience in other countries, not only in this case, proved your point. Anyway, it was a very happy time for me professionally even though we were working very hard. We had two little kids living out in Vienna, Virginia. We'd been out ten years by the time we came back for what really became our only U.S. posting, five years in the U.S., and my wife used that occasion to get her masters degree plus it is called in school psychology at George Mason. So she was working very hard and I was working very hard and we were trying to tend two kids who were...

Q: How old were they?

WILLS: When we came back our son was five and our daughter was two, I guess. So our lives were full and busy. Even though I was an O-1 at that time I'd been promoted to 0-1 in Barbados, we could barely get by financially. It was a stressful period but we were happy at home and happy at work; it was a great time. But it came time to decide what I would do next. Frank had left and a guy named Chas Freeman had come in to replace him, a brilliant officer as well.

Q: I've interviewed Chas too.

WILLS: A brilliant officer, he didn't know a damn thing about Africa and became deeply knowledgeable in a matter of a few weeks.

Q: He learned Arabic while ambassador to Saudi Arabia.

WILLS: He learned Chinese well enough to be the official interpreter for Richard Millhouse Nixon on that historic first visit. The guy is a genius.

Q: He is.

WILLS: He would read a book a day. We would go on trips to southern Africa and Chas would go through a book like this.

Q: He's turning the pages very rapidly.

WILLS: He told me one time he reads at least one book every day. I would get home after an eleven or twelve-hour day at the State Department and taking care of two little kids while my wife went off to her night classes. The best I could do was turn on television and watch Northern Exposure or something to take my mind off...Chas was reading deep philosophical books and improving his mind and I was not. Anyway, people at State wondered whether I would like to convert to the State Department. USIA was pressing me about taking an assignment as deputy PAO in Yugoslavia; we have a very big USIA posting there. I talked it over with my wife and I felt loyalty to USIA and I'd always wanted to learn a Slavic language. At that point I spoke Romanian, French, Persian and a little Zulu. I wanted to learn another language, a Slavic language; Eastern Europe had always been my first love. So I ended my assignment in State, as I say, maybe the happiest professional period in my life, and went back to USIA and took ten-months of Serbo-Croatian, it was a difficult language to learn, all those damn cases. But the way I am about so many things was I was very systematic. I would study so hard and I came out of that with a three plus three plus after ten months and I was rarely as proud of an accomplishment as I was of that language result.

Q: Vrlo Dobro! Before we move to Serbia let's talk a little bit about what you were doing while you were on the South Africa desk, you yourself. What sorts of things were you involved in?

WILLS: Well as you know a guy or gal who runs the desk, especially a class one desk, is dealing with every aspect of diplomacy. I think I mentioned in an earlier conversation I had befriended the guy who was the head of the Umkhonto we Sizwe, the Spear of the Nation, the ANC's military wing. At one point, for example, Chet and Frank and Jeff Davidow and I were musing about how we could open up some contacts with the ANC with which we had no links really, as a way of putting more pressure on the White government in South Africa. Letting the people there know that we also were dealing with these guys and we also thought it would be useful as a way of exchanging messages; it turned out to be very useful. Well I piped up and said, "Well I happen to know the head of Umkhonto we Sizwe, he was my gardener in South Africa." They were laughing and thinking I was not serious, it turned out I was and that's how we initiated contact with the ANC. I flew to New York when we learned through intelligence he was coming to address a UN conference against apartheid. I showed up, we met and this lead eventually to the head of the ANC's coming to Washington and meeting Secretary Shultz. The photograph of my introducing the two gentlemen has an honored spot on my "me" wall at home. That's one thing.

I spent a lot of time on nuclear issues because we knew the South African's had constructed a few nuclear weapons and we were trying to figure out how many and we were trying to get them to give them up. Frank especially was deeply involved in that and he and I and a couple others flew to South Africa a couple times to try to talk the South African's into giving up their nuclear weapons, which they did after the end of apartheid. But that train left the station a few years before as a result of our talks. The South African's knew that they couldn't really use these weapons, I forget how...

Q: How would they be used for?

WILLS: Exactly, but they had terrifically talented corps of scientists in the country and they were very clever about reprocessing fuel away from international inspections and acquiring some technologies they needed surreptitiously.

Q: There is supposedly an Israeli connection?

WILLS: Yes, there is even talk that something had happened, I think it happened while I was on the desk.

Q: That explosion?

WILLS: Yes, it was an Israeli-South African joint operation.

Q: There was this phenomenon out of ...

WILLS: Out in the Indian Ocean.

Q: Out in the Indian Ocean.

WILLS: Yeah. So that was another thing I worked on. The main thing we were doing was talking to them about apartheid and doing everything we could to improve the conditions for Blacks in South Africa, for political prisoners in South Africa, for Nelson Mandela on Robben Island. We would meet with the government either here at the embassy or out in South Africa constantly prodding them and making ourselves, I'm sure, quite unpleasant from their point of view, about police actions. Everyday there was some news story; that's why we did so many press guidance's. Somebody got killed in one of the townships or a political prisoner was beaten up, or there was a military action n Namibia where the South African's were backing one of the rebel leaders or in Angola where they were involved in the civil war there. So everyday there was a new crisis, something that we had to deal with. Let me digress here for a moment and tell you the best benefit I ever received in my Foreign Service career. As I said, we lived out in Vienna and I didn't qualify for a State Department parking pass. So everyday I would put on the back of my Volkswagen bug, a car that I commuted in, my bicycle. I would drive down to the State Department before the HOV restrictions...

Q: High Occupancy Vehicles.

WILLS: Yeah, 66 and I would drive down to Hains Point where I could park the little VW for free and ride my bicycle up to the State Department and park it in the basement. Well unbeknownst to me one day I was coming into the Department, this would have been about in November about eight months after I took the job. It was a rainy cold November morning and there I was pedaling into the Department. Chet Crocker happened to be driving into his State Department parking place and saw me. I didn't even know. That day I got a call from Chet Crocker's secretary who told me, who was a wonderful woman, and she told me that Chet Crocker had decreed that I will get a parking pass because he knew how hard I was working and that I had bought into his policy. So for the next two years I had a parking pass in the State Department. I can't describe to you what a joy it was to work and to drive into that building every morning and have a place I could park that little old VW bug that I partially restored so that I could have cheap transportation.

We had an interesting cast of characters on the desk, too. As I say, there were five of us so I had four assistant desk officers. Some of them knew about South Africa, some of them had no experience, all of them, I think, were skeptical about what we were doing at the start and after working there for a few months, obviously there was a lot of turn over, they'd all come to agree with the philosophy behind the diplomacy. We got along very well; one of them was a woman by the name of Sue Keough who was born a British national, educated in the UK and married an American FSO named Dennis Keough who was with our defense attachï¿½ at the time on an official visit to Namibia. They were in a gas station when one of the insurgent groups, I can't remember which one it was it might have been UNITA, blew a bomb up in the gas station. They weren't targeted, they just happened to be there and both of them were killed, Sue's husband. This happened in '82 or so or '83 maybe. So the State Department to its great credit offered Sue, since marrying Dennis had become a U.S. citizen, a job first as a civil servant and then she was brought into the Foreign Service and she had a distinguished career. I think she ended her career as consul general in Quebec City. She was one of the people on the desk. We had very talented people and everybody busting his ass.

Q: Being the public affairs person were you stuck with the job of meeting all these groups that wanted to come and pound on the table? Do you know what I mean?

WILLS: I wasn't the only one. It would depend on the level if it were a senior group, reputable group I would see them, if I could, if not one of the other four people on the desk would see them. I remember one time this is a bit of a kafuffle the Swedish DCM and the Swedish political counselor, I guess he was the charge, came in to see me and I don't know how you feel about Swedish diplomacy or Nordic diplomacy generally but they can be condescending and they can be quite excessively moralistic. This guy called on me and started lecturing me about the evils of constructive engagement and how Swedish diplomacy took the principled stand there should be no contact at all with the evil apartheid regime. He went on and on and on, a soliloquy about ten minutes long, and I had three of my desk officers in this meeting with me because we weren't sure what subjects he wanted to discuss so I had the economics person, the human rights person and the political person and there were four of us. So I listened to this lecture for about ten minutes in my office. At the end of it I said, "Sir, I've had enough of your lectures. This meeting is not going to serve any useful purpose. Please leave my office and leave the Department of State." I kicked him out of the building. The desk officer for Sweden was there as well, it was a big kafuffle and I still think it was the right thing to do.

Q: Absolutely.

WILLS: What a prick coming into my office and telling off the United States...it was really bad. Anyway that was the sort of thing that was going on. There was a lot of tension and I understand now after years and years and years of retrospective thought that the guy was under orders to do that. He just didn't do it very well.

Q: Did you ever read a short article by the columnist and writer Tom Wolfe called Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers?

WILLS: No, I never did.

Q: Well this was of this talking about Black activists in San Francisco and particularly they included Samoans who are very big people.

WILLS: They are very big.

Q: And they would go in to protest about something and get screaming in the face and meeting then would be a man with rimless glasses and some pencils stuck in his thing and he was the bureaucratic and he would sit there and listen to it. He was designated flack catcher and the Mau-Mau's were the people who were trying to fight them. It was one of these little dramas that goes on all the time, which results in a lot of lightening and no particular substance.

WILLS: One of the reasons why we were all I think quite happy in that period and that bureau and that office was because there were several people in that group that had great senses of humor. If you can't see the humor in American diplomacy even on a serious subject like assaulting apartheid and trying to end it then there is something wrong with you. We had wonderful camaraderie in the office; we would have great parties, it was the best office. People would come from all over the State Department for AF/S Christmas parties. Everybody would bring something; I would make rum punch, a Barbadian recipe for rum punch. It was really a lot of fun. We felt like we were on a mission.

Q: By the time you left, about two and a half years, did you see any discernable cracks in the system?

WILLS: I accompanied Frank Wisner a couple of times and Chas Freeman once in meetings with Pik Botha who was then the foreign minister of South Africa. Once to a meeting with P.W. Botha who was then...well he was initially the prime minister then a guy named de Klerk took over for him and he's the one who brought about the end. I could see that they were becoming negotiable whereas when I lived in South Africa in the late '70s eight or nine years earlier they showed no flexibility at all and were supremely confident that their way was the virtuous way. By the time I left the desk in the summer of '87 it was clear in their body language and what they said that their confidence was cracking. They were not sure what they had done was right, that maybe what they'd done was a colossal error. I think Pik Botha made it plain that the goal at that point in early '87 was to manage the end of apartheid, which ended, what was it, four years later, three years later. So even today some people will say it was the sanctions and the ostracism of the international community and they played a role. I don't question that at all but we also played a role. If we hadn't been their outlet, if we hadn't been their counselors, their psychological priests, if they hadn't had anybody outside who could reassure them that they could do this that they could end this in an honorable way and still protect the interest of not just their community but other South Africans then...

Q: What were you getting from your Black Africans, South African, contacts?

WILLS: You mean in neighboring countries?

Q: Also within the country, but I mean representatives.

WILLS: I think a lot of Black South Africans were angry at us for dealing with the Botha's and the Afrikaner leadership. A few might have understood it in an intellectual sense but emotionally living as a Black in South Africa, my God, what a horror. I think very few if any Black South African's accepted what we were doing but as I say some I think probably understood it intellectually. In the region as a whole, I think the leaders of the surrounding nations understood that this was a useful diplomatic thing even if they were as committed to the end of apartheid as we were or maybe more committed. As proof that constructive engagement worked with Samora Machel, he moved off his Marxism. Robert Mugabe throughout the '80s behaved himself. It was only since then that he's turned into a monster. There might be evil in the world and if there is he represents it.

Q: I think that in a way is not a matter of policy. That's a personal...

WILLS: Yeah, but my point is Robert Mugabe, Samora Machel, Kenneth Kaunda they all moved in ways favorable to America's national interest in that period and I attribute it very substantially to Chet's philosophical construct and his willingness to deal respectfully with people he disagreed with. I think that's the way I've tried to operate since then in other countries.

So anyway a year of Serbo-Croatian.

Q: Okay, again we are picking this up. This is November 18, 2008 Ashley Wills. So you finished was it still called Serbo-Croatian at this time?

WILLS: Yeah, turns out that I was there the last three years that federation existed. When I got there in the summer of '88 with what I thought was good Serbo-Croatian as I'm sure you've learned in your career. You can be by FSI standards more than competent in a language but when you get to a country you discover oh my God...

Q: Yes.

WILLS: I'm not as good as I thought I was. That was certainly the case the first six months or so I was in Yugoslavia. After a while my ear got tuned and my language got better and I ended up doing well. I remember the first cocktail party I went to, or official reception, the defense attachï¿½ I think was the host and I was there speaking Serbo-Croatian to this guy. He was chattering at me and I realized I didn't understand a word he was saying. He might have been saying as far as I knew that he intended to come over to my house that night, rape my wife and murder my children. And I'm sitting there smiling happily like I understand what the son of a bitch is saying because we learn, as you know, in the diplomatic service to nod agreeably even when we don't know what is going on. But after a while my Serbo-Croatian got better.

Q: But you were there from '88 to?

WILLS: '91.

Q: To '91 and where were you?

WILLS: I was in Belgrade. I think it was like the third largest USIS installation in the world. We had six or seven branch posts in each of the republican capitals. My job was to be the COO, the operating officer and make sure all these posts ran well and that the personnel were doing their jobs; it was like being a DCM except it was a USIS post. We had a couple of PAOs there and we had a history of legendary USIS officers in Yugoslavia.

Q: Walter Roberts I knew very well.

WILLS: Yeah, he was one of them. We had Terry Catherman and a couple guys who had been PAO in Moscow and then became PAO Belgrade. The two PAOs when I was there were both able officers but they weren't legendary so I had a lot of scope and I took advantage of it and traveled a lot in the country, to all the republics. The ambassador when I got there was a guy by the name of Jack Scanlon, John Scanlon, and he died not long ago. He had a reputation when I got there of being a little bit too close to Slobodan Milosevic who was then the leader of Serbia within the federation. He left about four months after I got there and almost immediately went to work for...

Q: Pelsege or something?

WILLS: Yeah, it was a Serbian...

Q: A Serbian drug manufacturer?

WILLS: I think that's right. It kind of reinforced the image that he had developed in the Foreign Service as being too pro-Serb. I'm not sure whether it was an accurate portrayal of Scanlon.

Q: There was a reputation.

WILLS: I didn't work with him very much so I didn't really know a lot about him. We had a brief period when the DCM was the Chargï¿½ and very quickly Warren Zimmermann came; he was a great ambassador and one of the finest FSOs I've ever worked with. We hit it off really well. Warren was very inclusive about making judgments and when something major was being considered he would ensure that either the PAO or I was present to represent USIS's interest even when the subject had nothing to do with us. Personally, Warren and his wife, Teeny, and my wife, Gina, and I became good friends. I later learned when I was an ambassador how difficult it is to have friends in the embassy. But because I was the deputy PAO and not the PAO for some reason I think he felt that it was okay. He and Teeny and I shared a passion for fly-fishing and Yugoslavia has some spectacular trout rivers. So whenever we could we were out on weekends in Slovenia or Croatia or a particular river in Serbia fishing. It also gave us a chance to meet normal Yugoslavs, every day Yugoslavs. Yugoslavia was, when it was a federation, a spectacular country, very beautiful, very under appreciated. Some people know about the coast, the Adriatic coast, but the country overall is just gorgeous, just gorgeous so I loved traveling around. I knew Sarajevo very, very well before it was nearly destroyed by a civil war.

Q: Warren and Teeny didn't mention the time that they had a gypsy party at the little cottage next to the ambassador's residence and we all got quite drunk and went skinny-dipping in the embassy pool.

WILLS: In Yugoslavia?

Q: Yeah.

WILLS: Back when he was a junior officer?

Q: Yeah, that was when I was chief of the consular section.

WILLS: No, he never mentioned that.

Q: I thought so. I wonder Ashley could you talk a bit first when you got out there in '88. What was the political situation then?

WILLS: It was tense already. Milosevic had already begun to move in a pretty Serb first direction. It was not clear at all that the federation would break apart at that point; there had been rumors, speculations ever since Tito died in the early '80s, '81 or something like that I can't even remember when he died. That it was his personality, which kept the place together and then it would eventually fall apart. It's true that he did impose his will on the place, that subsequent leaders didn't have his prestige or his personal charisma in sufficient quantities to dominate politics and keep the federation together. But at that point in '88 although things didn't look great it was still holding together and yet there were worrying trends. Milosevic's personality and approach were big problems; the country's economy was faltering, inflation was a couple hundred percent a day at certain points. We were recalculating the pay that we would give our FSNs every week because inflation was so out of control.

But the most worrying part of the economy was certain parts of the country were well ahead of other parts. Slovenia, Croatia, even within Serbia, Vojvodina was a more prosperous part of the country than the rest of Serbia. It was these differences in economic growth rates and prosperity that, I think, led to the breakup of the federation as much as nationalist or ethnic resentment. If there had been more growth in Serbia and Kosovo, in Montenegro and Macedonia then, I think, the impulse to leave the federation wouldn't have been so great for Slovenia and Croatia. But because they felt that their earnings were being taxed by the federation and transferred to poorer parts of the republic they could see no future in staying. They also were getting more and more pissed off by Milosevic's aggressive policies and the federal president, who's name I can't remember, was a good man. He was a Croat, as I recall, but he couldn't keep things together; he just didn't have the wherewithal.

Q: Regarding Milosevic was there much contact with him?

WILLS: Warren saw him often and he wrote some wonderful cables about those meetings. I remember one had the title There Are Two Slobodan Milosevic's and the cable went on to describe how Milosevic, who spoke some English, could meet with foreign investors, American delegations, people from outside Yugoslavia and be a charming sophisticated man who would come across as moderate and negotiable, reasonable. Then there was the Slobodan Milosevic who was the Serbian politician who was as fiery and unreasonable and actually irresponsible as any dictator one could encounter. Warren had a very keen analytical mind and he was a great writer. So over the three years, well he was there about two and a half years of my three years there and he became more and more disenchanted with Milosevic.

The Europeans, frankly, were feckless, they said they were going to assist us in trying to keep the federation together, which we wanted to do for all kinds of geo-strategic reasons, and they didn't. In fact the Germans were conspiring with the Slovenes and the Croats to recognize them the day they left the federation and they did. I'm sure you know there were all sorts of proof that they were double dealing because they had their own interest in the Balkans. We with Warren leading the way and getting Secretary Baker's attention, Jim Baker was the Secretary, tried through a series of interventions to keep the thing together. I never will forget toward the very end I guess in May of '91 it looked like the federation was going to break apart but Baker made one last visit and we summoned all six or seven republican presidents to Belgrade, to the UN. He had brought out a guy to be his interpreter but interpreting in seven meetings straight was just too much and I ended up doing the interpreting for the last two meetings. That interpreters name was an FSO named Vic Jackovich, USIA officer who was of Yugoslav descent and had great Serbo-Croatian obviously. He was a great linguist; he spoke about seven or eight languages. He later served as the first U.S. ambassador to maybe it was Croatia or Bosnia, I can't remember.

Q: Where is he now?

WILLS: He's retired and I believe he lives in Europe. Anyway, I with my family left Yugoslavia on June 21st I think it was 1991 and a civil war broke out two days later in the republic.

Q: I'm not going to let you get away with this.

WILLS: No, no, no. Okay.

Q: Okay, in the first place how affective and what were you trying to do with USIA of...

WILLS: Programs?

Q: ...programs to various places?

WILLS: Well we had several objectives. One was to keep the federation together, one was to introduce more democracy than even Yugoslavia allowed. Yugoslavia as you know very well, was not a typical Communist dictatorship, very different from the start and had evolved to the point where it had the appearance of democracy in some ways even though it was a one-party state. We had big economic objectives. I spent a lot of time on the economic parts of our program because we saw this worrying disparity and that this was undermining the stability of the state. I'm trying to remember the word that was used to describe self-management. What the hell was that word? Samo...

Q: Samo...

WILLS: Something like that and they ran factories this way and they were running them into the ground because nobody was running the factory if you let the workers run it. So we were trying to get them to move as quickly as possible toward a freer market. Meanwhile, you will recall this was all happening while next-door Nicolae Ceausescu had been taken out and executed. The Soviet Union was becoming unstuck and all of Eastern Europe was moving with greater or lesser alacrity away from Communism. The Yugoslavs who had started off well ahead in this respect had in some ways fallen behind because of their political disagreements amongst themselves. So we spent a lot of time on economic issues. Of course the Slovenes and the Croats were very keen to do just exactly what we were suggesting. The Serbs were not so keen, the southern states generally were worried that free market economics would impoverish them. In fact, we were arguing the opposite so I spent a lot of time on that, we as a USIS post did.

I spent a hell of a lot of time on personnel issues because if you run six or seven posts and you've got one, two, three or four Americans in each one of them and anywhere from six or eight to thirty or forty Yugoslavs there are all kinds of...

Q: Give an idea of some of the problems you had.

WILLS: We had a branch PAO at one post who could not get along with the consul general. I had to go out several times to try to make peace between them and get them working more positively. There would be some progress and then something would happen and they would get on bad terms again. We had an officer; this was before the State Department changed its rules, who was gay and the longer he was in Yugoslavia the more active he became. There were security personnel in the embassy who wanted him removed from post instantly. My task was to try to solve that without violating our security rules or this officer's privacy. Oh God, there are so many...a young officer only his second post working as a branch PAO and he just didn't know, he was young, he didn't know what to do. He needed to be coached from beginning to end about how to operate and how to manage and how to reach out. Thank goodness he had good Serbo-Croatian and he later proved to be quite effective; but at the beginning it was touch and go about whether he would make it. Those were the sorts of things that I dealt with. Then in Belgrade I also had to run a big information section and a big cultural center. We had eight or ten officers in Belgrade, different personalities, and different strengths. The press attachï¿½ was very able in many ways but not a very good writer so whereas in many embassies the press attachï¿½ writes the ambassador's speeches that just didn't work so I ended up writing Warren's speeches for him. We had a cultural officer who was married to a State Department officer and there were all kinds of indiscretions being committed by one or the other of them in the course of the assignment there; that was not pleasant.

On a personal side our two kids liked the school and did well. We liked being in Yugoslavia because of the travel; it was such a beautiful country. But we also did something that, I guess, the current generation of officers can't do. We had all these military installations still in Germany and we used to take the family and put our little Volvo station wagon on the car train as it was called and get us two sleepers and ride through the night and wake up in the morning in Ljubljana and then take that car off the train and drive across a piece of Austria and get to Berchtesgaden where there were three or four U.S. owned hotels. It was just so much fun to get out of Yugoslavia and go to Bavaria. We were next door to Italy and we would take the car train to Ljubljana and then drive into Northern Italy. It was just a wonderful well-located place and it was beautiful. As I think I mentioned earlier, my wife learns languages osmotically and Christ she would pick up Italian while we were there or pick up Slovenian or whatever. So it was just a lot of fun for our family.

Q: What about places, I'm thinking particularly more obscure regions Macedonia and Montenegro, getting...how were programs working in these places?

WILLS: It would depend on the talents of the branch PAO. In Macedonia we had a youngish officer who was energetic and would get things going and come up with ideas of stuff that we would do. In Montenegro we had a more experienced officer who spent most of his career in academic life and then joined the Foreign Service pretty late. He was not as imaginative as this other officer but he was very steady and he was on very good terms with the Montenegro leadership; he was more politically astute, I think. We had a lot of money from USIA so we would bring in speakers all the time. We must have had a speaker a week somewhere in the country.

Q: They loved to come there.

WILLS: Yeah, they loved to come there and we were turning them over all the time. Madeleine Albright came, she fashioned herself a East European expert, which her PhD. is in.

Q: She lived in Yugoslavia.

WILLS: She was a daughter of a Czech diplomat but that would be typical. We had what's his face, this guy who now runs Columbia's economics program but he made a name for himself advising these economies right after their transition away from the Soviet style, Jeffrey Sachs. We could get leading American intellectuals in whatever the field because Yugoslavia was a funky place to go and a beautiful place. We would insist you come to this country and travel around to those six posts or at least four of them. We wouldn't accept a speaker who wouldn't agree to go to at least four; usually we made them go to all six. So we would have officers accompanying them out of Belgrade on trains around Yugoslavia, occasionally on planes. So all of our officers got out.

Q: I figure when I was there I overnighted in 42 different places.

WILLS: I have to tell you about another exciting, personal triumph. I caught the biggest trout I'd ever caught on a fly in the Sava Bohinjka River in Slovenia. Warren and Teeny and I were up there on a fishing trip and they were just around the corner. These three Yugoslavs were fishing from the bank with bait. I had waders and I went out in the middle of the Sava Bohinjka, they thought that was crazy to begin with, and I caught this 27 inch fish they called a marble trout. It's an unusual species, unique to Yugoslavia. These Yugoslavs on the bank, Slovenes, cheered as I wrestled this fish with my little fly rod, they didn't even know what fly-fishing was. I caught the fish, held him up, cheers from the guy's forty or fifty yards away on the bank and then I carefully revived the fish and released him. They went nuts because they were there to fish for food. For me it was for sport, God Slovenia was beautiful, just gorgeous.

Q: What were we doing and what was the response and all in Kosovo at the time?

WILLS: We didn't have a post in Pristina. We, meaning USIS and the embassy, of course had no office there at all. The embassy had a consulate in Zagreb and that was it; just two posts and our post was the principal source of information in reporting really about political developments. But Pristina was nominally part of Serbia so we would cover it out of Belgrade. We had a very able political counselor named Louie Sell. Louie became expert in matters Kosovoan. He would go down there a lot, I went down there a couple of times and a couple of other officers went down to meet with the Kosovo leadership. We were very critical of Serbia's approach even then. Milosevic was particularly obnoxious on this. This was a part of Serbia and it would never be anything else.

Q: That's June 29th '89 wasn't it?

WILLS: Yeah and they were committing atrocities down there of generally small scale meaning at a time three or four Kosovars would be rounded up by Serbian police and roughed up or killed. There was nothing on a large scale until later after I left. But we were very sympathetic with the Kosovar point of view. We made it plain that some new arrangement had to be arrived at, that 88 percent of the people of Kosovo were ethnic Albanians and they were being dominated by a police force that was overwhelmingly Serb. It was just an untenable situation even then and it became less tenable after I left.

Q: What was our feeling toward Madame Milosevic?

WILLS: She was an academic by background and taught, I think, at the University of Belgrade even while...

Q: Something like that.

WILLS: Slobodanovich...

Q: Boxes and something like that.

WILLS: She didn't have the last name Milosevic. I'm trying to remember what name she used; it was her maiden name but I just can't remember what it was. I didn't deal with her, I didn't know her, and I never met her to my knowledge or recollection. I think she was seen then, I think it's been shown to be so since as a pretty hard-line adviser who was remarkably racist about Albanians among other things and about Muslims generally. Bosnia she apparently had no role in what happened in Bosnia but was not at all unhappy to see the Bosnian Serbs moving against not only the Muslims but the Croats too who lived in Bosnia.

Q: Well now things were moving at the end of '89 when Eastern Europe fell apart. What happened say to the press because I came from an era where politica borva were simply turning out this...

WILLS: Crap.

Q: Crap. I mean apparently...

WILLS: Absolute crap. I don't want to say there was freedom of the press, there was not. But there was more freedom than had been the case apparently in Yugoslavia prior to 1988. There were commentators who were writing about these events outside the country mainly about events inside Yugoslavia in ways that were not necessarily congenial to Serbia's interest. Of course the press in Croatia and Slovenia was moving more and more and more toward a kind of uniform hostility to the republic and they were clamoring for independence; but there were even commentators in Serbia who would take on Milosevic in print. Now they wouldn't necessarily prosper, they weren't favored with interviews and that sort of thing but they weren't taken out and shot either, as might have been the case earlier.

Q: Was this Croatian-Serbian virus affecting your relations or the embassy's relations with consul general in Zagreb?

WILLS: Yeah, the consul general in Zagreb, his assignment coincided with mine. In fact, he stayed an extra year.

Q: Who was this?

WILLS: Michael Einik. He became as I suppose happens more and more identified with the Croatian point of view and would come up for consultations; he made it plain that he thought he was coming to some medieval city.

Q: It's the damndest thing.

WILLS: Frankly it's obnoxious as the dickens. In fact, I found Croat's every bit as obnoxious on one end as the Serbs were. The Croats portrayed themselves as these Western enlightened folk because they are Catholic and because Zagreb is pretty and neighbors Italy and all that. But they have a history of brutality as much as the Serbs had.

Q: Well their history during World War II was horrible.

WILLS: It was unconscionable, it was just horrible. Their attitude toward the Serbs when I got to Yugoslavia was obnoxious. It was condescending, it was tin eared, it was as though the Serbs had no legitimate point of view at all; they were heathen. I mean it was really hard to deal with. As I say, the Serbs were tough to deal with but I found the Croats just as tough. Meanwhile, the Slovenes were benefiting from this Croatian-Serbian tussle; they were merrily making preparations to leave the republic and were the first to leave. They benefited because that larger dispute hid their, well it didn't hide it everybody knew the Slovenes wanted out, but it made it easier for them, I think.

Q: Sure. Also Croatia sat between Slovenia and Serbia so when push came to shove a couple months after you left the Serbs couldn't do anything against Slovenia.

WILLS: They tried and the Slovenes put together a little army that held the Serbs off in the first few days of the civil war. I mean Yugoslavia was a fascinating place, just fascinating. We had very able senior officers in the mission pretty much all the way around. We had the attention of Washington. Baker for whom I do not have the greatest respect as a secretary of State did very well I think in presenting the U.S. diplomatic point of view there. It didn't work but it wasn't his fault, we were being undermined by the Germans and the French and others and even that really wasn't decisive. That country was going to break apart sooner or later, it happened, there was really nothing that we could have done about it. In a way it's surprising that it lasted as long as it did.

Q: Okay, we will pick this up Ashley next time you left in what '91?

WILLS: Left in '91 and we can talk about this later. I went to the Senior Seminar for a year and then went immediately to Brussels.

Q: Okay.

Q: This is with Ashley Wills and today is December 5th, 2008. Ashley, you were at the Senior Seminar from when to when?

WILLS: Let's see, September of '91, right after I came back from Yugoslavia, until the following June or so.

Q: How did you find it?

WILLS: Well I thought it was a lot of fun and relaxing and probably not worth the taxpayer's money. I think there were 25 of us or so from the State Department and USIA and maybe seven or eight from the military. I wasn't sure on what basis the decision was made: that these 25 FSOs should go and the other 100 or 200 or whatever who wanted to go and didn't get selected. So I thought it was a little arbitrary and then the experience itself was great fun; my God we'd come to work at 9 o'clock and we'd leave at 3:30 or 4:00. We'd be lectured to all day long or we would go on interesting trips, one trip a month. The first trip of the year was a great ten-day trip to Alaska; I'd never been to Alaska before. We had a dedicated Air Force 707 that flew us from DC to some place in North Dakota, a missile base, for refueling; then we sat down in Nome, Alaska. This was early September and there was already a foot of snow on the ground in Nome. Then we went up to the northern slope where all the oil exploration is going on. We visited the Red Dog mine, we went to Juneau and met the governor; we went to Anchorage, went to Fairbanks, went to Sitka Island. I mean imagine all that in ten days only because we had our own plane.

Issues were divided up into units and we would look at trade issues one month and then another month we'd look at crime in America. I went over and rode around for the whole night actually with a Baltimore cop. He made a drug arrest with me standing there; so that was kind of fun. I had a great experience midway through the year. They then required us to take a month and do something we'd never done before, at taxpayer expense. So I had always wanted to be a journalist, I'd always enjoyed writing and I had been subscribing for some years to an environmental magazine out in the Rockies called The High Country News. So I wrote the editor and said, "Would you accept me as a journalist for a month, it doesn't cost you a damn thing." He said, "Sure thing." So I went and did that and others did other bizarre things; but in that month I wrote stories for the newspaper. I also volunteered...this place is in a little town called Paonia, Colorado; it has a population of 2,500 so it's a small town. I don't know if you remember, Stu, but back in those days there was a very popular television show on the U.S. called Northern Exposure?

Q: Oh yes.

WILLS: Well this little town in the mountains of Colorado was just like that town in Alaska on the television show. It had a storefront radio station, a public radio station and although Paonia only had 2,500 residents it was the biggest town in this whole valley on the western slope of the Rockies so people all over this valley would listen to that radio station. The most important thing they listened to, the most popular program was NPR's All Things Considered. So I walked in the second day I was in Paonia and volunteered. I'd seen an announcement on a bulletin board or something in town, they were looking for announcers, so I volunteered and I became a radio announcer. The first night the guy said, "Whatever you do please don't fuck up the link to Washington for NPR's All Things Considered because you will get calls from all over the valley and we'll have enraged listeners," and he showed me how to do the link. It came time, seven o'clock I guess for the link and I didn't do it right so there was silence on the radio. Sure enough the switchboard lit up, people all over the valley were distressed and the station manager had to come back in and show me a second time. After that I got it right. But I had a short career as a radio announcer and a short career as a journalist covering...my particular beat was water issues in the Rockies which were very important, who owns the water, what are its uses for agriculture, for recreation. So I did that and that was great but as I said for a year I thought it was not a wise use of taxpayer's money. But for me I'm delighted I had the chance the do it. What other career can you have a sabbatical year like that?

Q: Okay, after that the real world came back to you didn't it?

WILLS: Yes, I knew when I went to the Senior Seminar I was going to go right after that ten-month assignment to Brussels. Because I had this masters degree in economics' courtesy of the State Department and USIA, I was assigned as PAO to our Mission to the European Union; I knew that before I went to the Senior Seminar so that was really wonderful to know what I was going to be doing for the year coming but also for the four years thereafter. But about half way through my Senior Seminar year I got a call from personnel in USIA asking me whether I would consider switching assignments with a guy who had been assigned as PAO at the bilateral mission in Brussels. The ambassador there had been director of USIA in the past and knew this particular officer and didn't like him and wouldn't accept him.

Q: Who was the ambassador then?

WILLS: Bruce Gelb. So personnel in USIA said, "We'll put this other officer at the EU and put you at the bilateral embassy." I thought about it and I didn't particularly want to do it but I decided to do it and so I was assigned to the embassy. Gelb coincidently left maybe a month after I got there because Bill Clinton was elected president and Gelb had been appointed by George Bush. We got a new ambassador named Alan Blinken who had been Al Gore's chief fundraiser and was an investment banker in New York. He was the man I worked with for the next three years.

All of my career at this point had been Communist counties or South Africa or the Caribbean and we had waited to try to get a Western European assignment when our children would be in high school and they could live with us instead of being sent away to boarding school as so often happens in our business. So we were really pleased to be there. We had a beautiful home quite near downtown Brussels. My kids were in school there and my daughter especially was very happy; my son got a little rambunctious and ironically we ended up sending him away to boarding school but all things summed it was just a delightful way to live. I've lived in many places and the most civilized country I've lived in was Brussels, Belgium; the food was marvelous. They used to say French quality, German portions, because you would get these enormous plates of fabulous food. When I went there I weighed 170 pounds, I was a pretty keen runner, I was running twelve miles a week for three years. I ran twelve miles a week in Brussels and I picked up 15 pounds because the food was so great.

Q: Okay, let's talk about what was the political situation in Belgium when you got there?

WILLS: Well we don't have a serious interest in Belgium per se; it's more that Belgium is part of Europe. But there is a king and there is a government there that is still struggling with the idea of unity. Belgium has two major sections, one is French speaking and the other is Dutch speaking. They've never got along very well and they get along even less well now than ever before and they weren't getting along well when we were living in Belgium. So, there was a certain amount of reporting that the embassy did about that but I wasn't so involved in that. The bilateral PAO, we had three PAOs there, three missions: the bilateral mission, the EU mission and NATO. The bilateral PAO nominally oversaw the activities of the other two missions but only nominally. So I got involved in some EU programs and some NATO things.

I think the most fun thing that I did while I was there, it was the 50th anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge in Bastogne in southern Belgium and I was put in charge of the big commemoration. Actually it was the 50th anniversary first of the landing at Normandy and then the Battle of the Bulge came several months later when our forces advanced toward Germany.

Q: June through December.

WILLS: Yeah, this was in December and the landing was in June, as you say. So I got to meet all these wonderful old veterans of the events at Bastogne of 1944. We arranged all kinds of commemorative events and Ambassador Blinken got deeply involved. It was a lot of fun and a very emotional experience to see these older gentlemen who fought in extremely difficult conditions and managed to prevail over a superior German force that had them surrounded; so that was fun. Anyway I was three years into my four-year tour and my wife was working at the embassy and had a good job, she was the assistant personnel officer. Things were going just fine, a relaxed assignment after difficult substantive jobs, this was not so difficult; things were going well. Then I got a call one night from a guy I had worked for in the Africa bureau when I was head of the South African desk, Frank Wisner. Have you done his?

Q: We've done a short one but we really need a longer one but he is up in New York so it's harder.

WILLS: Yeah, he is up in New York. Anyway he had just been named ambassador to India and he called me up in Brussels and said, "How would you like to come out to be PAO in India?" which was the largest USIA mission in the world. So going from a modest but pleasant Belgium to big India, which I'd never visited before, seemed a pretty dramatic change. I went home that night and talked to my wife who couldn't believe that I would seriously consider taking our family and moving from luxurious Belgium to less luxurious India. But I told her that it would be professionally enriching and Frank suggested that if I came out there and everything worked out I might be able to move into another job in the mission, although he couldn't be sure. In the end, I agreed to it and USIA personnel at first resisted because they didn't want to let an ambassador choose a PAO but Wisner is Wisner and he got his way and I went. We thus moved from Brussels in the summer of 1995 to India.

Q: Before we leave Brussels, how was Alan Blinken as an ambassador?

WILLS: He was good. I liked him, he's an amiable fellow, he and I were the only two people in the mission who smoked so even though I was an avid runner I smoked as well. He would come down to my office and in those days you could still smoke in certain offices and he could smoke in my office. We were also bird hunters so we became friends and as I say the diplomatic tasks that we faced in Belgium were not all that demanding. So he had time to develop a lot of friendships with Belgian nobility, Belgian business executives, people he perhaps had known, I don't know, in his investment-banking career. He ended up being pretty well connected in Belgian society. I remember once he was gone and the DCM was gone so I was the chargï¿½ actually, I was the chargï¿½, and lo and behold the king of Belgium died while I was chargï¿½. Suddenly we had to send out a delegation to be present at the king's funeral, so we had a very powerful delegation. We had Walter Mondale, I'm trying to remember all the senators, and I was their host and took them around Belgium and attended the funeral. So while it was a pretty quiet assignment all things considered there were moments of great activity and that was one of them.

Q: Well as the PAO, Public Affairs officer, did you find yourself having to watch what we were doing as an embassy not to get caught in this buzz saw of French versus Walloon or that type of thing?

WILLS: Yeah, to some extent. The truth was we obviously favored Belgium's remaining a united country but we were not wild about it. If they wanted to break apart into two countries it wouldn't have bothered us and it still wouldn't bother us. Why? Because even then they would still be part of the European Union and so it wasn't like what happened later in my career when I went to live in Sri Lanka. There we have a very passionate interest in keeping the country united. In the case of Belgium which is surrounded by developed European countries it didn't really matter to us all that much. But we said the right things; we said we wanted a united Belgium. The serious issues were more things related to missile deployment in Europe, expanding NATO. I got involved in a big, big, big, big program to expand NATO to the newly free countries of Eastern Europe. We had to carry out information programs in those countries that we developed in Belgium to persuade the populations in those countries, ex-Soviet vassal states, that joining NATO would be good for them; we did a lot of that. There were always economic issues that we had to deal with relating to the European Union's views on trade and other things where we wouldn't necessarily agree so we would go into the Belgian government and try to persuade them to persuade the EU to take up a position more to our liking. There was a bit of that. But my memory of those three years is not being terribly stressed professionally and having a hell of a good time with my family.

Q: What was your impression of the EU at that time?

WILLS: Way too bureaucratic, they were trying to regulate, they still are, European society down to the most minute detail, determining how a particular type of agricultural product should look and what its size should it be. There were regulations about that, regulations about every aspect of society and modem American society has got a lot of regulations but nothing like what is true in Europe. Also there was a fractiousness to it all; you have all those European nations but they don't look at the world the same way and getting the EU to take a common position was then and I think still is a very, very hard thing to accomplish.

Q: They say it is like herding cats.

WILLS: Yes, exactly. But one nevertheless has to have respect for what they've done. I mean starting with the iron and steel commission and...

Q: Coal and steel.

WILLS: ...or coal and steel I guess it was in the early '50s. To this? That is a significant amount of...

Q: I mean we've been involved in what amounted to in the last century two European civil wars.

WILLS: Yes.

Q: And this seems to have been a pretty good way to avoid that sort of thing.

WILLS: Yeah. I have another vignette unrelated to my profession to tell you about in Brussels.

Q: Yeah.

WILLS: When we got there my predecessor was the bilateral PAO and his predecessor and all PAOs since the early '50s, actually since the late '40s, had lived in this lovely home in a commune called Boisfort, it had been owned by the mayor of that commune. He had died and his venerable wife who was then in her late '60s would lease this...in fact, this was standard, leases were for nine years, a long time. The lease was coming up for renewal just as I was arriving there and she asked for more money, a great deal more money and it was entirely justified because the real estate market in Brussels had gone way up and what we were paying previously was very reasonable. So the embassy housing office informed me that it was too expensive and we couldn't live there any more, we were going to have to find another house. I said, "Well wait a minute, my wife and children had seen this house, it was gorgeous, beautiful gardens, lovely." So I said, "Give me a chance to talk to this woman and maybe I can get her to come down on the price." So we negotiated and my French in those days was pretty good and I brought along a housing officer from the embassy whose French was not good. The landlady didn't speak anything but French so she and I negotiated over three sessions. In the end I got the lease renewed for much less than we had been paying before. So everyone was pleased and my family moved into the house. Nine years later, in the intervening nine years she had died about a year before the lease ended. When the lease ended I was living in India for five years and we had moved to Sri Lanka. I got a call one day from a lawyer in Brussels who said, "Madame (I can't remember her last name now) but Madame Reneau, or something like that, died and in her will she stipulated that when the lease comes up for renewal and to settle her estate the house should be sold but she stipulated that you should have first right of refusal to buy the house and she even determined the price. It's well below what that house is worth, Monsieur Wills. We would like to know whether you would like to buy the house." Here I am in Sri Lanka and he has chased me all over the world to find me. He wanted $1.7 million for this house, that was it. I knew the Brussels real estate market well enough to know that house was worth three or four million dollars even then but it was more than my wife and I had. So I had to respectfully decline the chance so I made more of an impression on Madame Reneau than I thought. This little exchange heartened me; maybe I was a better negotiator than I thought.

Q: Okay, let's go to India.

WILLS: Yeah, let's go to India.

Q: You were in India from when to when?

WILLS: I got there in June or July 1995.

Q: Yeah.

WILLS: And we stayed five years. For the first two years I was PAO, the first year and a half or so. The next three to three and a half I was DCM. As I said, I think it was the biggest USIS program in the world at the time. Also at the time USIA was declining as an agency; its budget was being whacked and the first thing I had to do there was cut something like $2 million out of the budget. We had, believe it or not, in USIS India at the time we had about 38 Americans and I want to say 750 Indians; it was a huge empire. I had to cut, actually it was more than $2 million it was something like three or four million. Anyway, I ended up cutting maybe half the Americans down to 20 and about half the Indians down to 400, all in the space of about six months; that was traumatic. We had all kinds of negotiations with the employees associations, with the American officers concerned; I obviously didn't want to have their assignments curtailed. Then we had to eliminate all kinds of activities. We had libraries all over the country that were deeply part of the local communities, American centers they were called. We had magazines being published, television shows we produced; it was a very big operation. Frank Wisner, as I said, was the ambassador and Frank is nothing if not opinionated and he informed me at the first meeting we had when I got there that he wanted me to close down those American center libraries and the magazines, quit publishing the magazines. I said, "Frank, I just got here, you've got to let me look at the situation and determine which are the activities that we can cease and which ones we should continue." I decided almost immediately that those magazines and those libraries were way too valuable. Everyday you would walk in and there were 300 Indians in the library reading everything that we had. The magazine in a country that is as...India has a big problem with illiteracy even now but it also has some of the most literate people in the world and they loved our libraries. So I had a much tougher time negotiating this with Frank Wisner than I think our negotiators had doing the SALT talks with the Russians back in the Cold War. But eventually he let me do what I wanted to do and I cut other things and kept the libraries open and the magazine going. I'm happy to say here we are thirteen years later and they are still going; they are still valuable.

Q: What sort of things were you cutting?

WILLS: We closed a couple of small posts, we eliminated some of the television and radio programs that we were doing. We published fewer newsletters than we had been doing, although we maintained one or two of them. That was it; mainly it was a question of reducing staff. We got people to work harder, longer hours to produce as much as they could. It was very stressful cutting all those people but very pleasing that it ended up being a fairly happy post even with all those cuts. We were, I think, especially effective in the Indian media. Have you lived in India?

Q: Nope.

WILLS: My God I've never seen anything like it. To go from Belgium where everything in moderation is venerated to India where there is nothing moderate in the country, it was the biggest culture shock I had ever experienced as an American diplomat moving around the world. I mean there are the shocking aspects as far as poverty is concerned, seeing beggars everywhere; you have to remember 1995 India had just begun its economic reform program after forty years of socialism. Over half the world's poor at that point as defined by the United Nations lived in India. But in the middle of all that poverty one would find absolutely astonishing wealth. There were so many rich Indians and no one had told me about that. It was a country of extremes, a country where you would go out in the deserts of Rajasthan and come across the ruins of a castle that had belonged to a maharaja and that dated from the 4th century, it was just amazing, amazing things that you could find and that weren't restored; they were just out there. It was such a remarkable place and such a deep culture. They would take a kind of condescending view toward us and say, "Oh you Americans you are only 200 or so years old, our culture is 3,000 years old." There was some truth to it but I got tired of being patronized.

Q: People always equate it that our culture started in 1776 but it goes back as far as any...basically it comes out of Europe so it's not as though it just sprang up all of a sudden.

WILLS: But I have never lived in a place that was as culturally dense as India. We like to think that our society is diverse, we are minor leaguers compared to the Indians. They have 20 something official languages; English is spoken only by a small percentage of the people but still a large number in absolute terms. They have the caste system, which complicates things; it's the second most populated Muslim country in the world, there are 140 million Muslims in India. It's the birthplace of Hinduism and Buddhism, there is Jainism and there are Zoroastrians, there is a Jewish community. I sometimes felt that you needed a degree in higher math to figure it all out it was so complex and so awesome. There was not one day that I lived in India in five years when I wasn't reminded in some way this is a very different place than I am used to; this is a very strange country.

So I found it professionally and personally too to be enriching, deeply aggravating, the Indians would piss me off, piss us all off, especially Brahmin's, higher caste Indians with their preening and their belief that they were superior to everybody. Living there was so difficult, the climatic conditions were tough. Getting things done in our house, we had nine people who worked in our house full time. In the back of our house we had a row of dwellings, it was like a little village. Those nine people had spouses and children; there were 45 people who lived on our property apart from our four-person family. So you needed all those people to get things done, to have your water boiled because people were getting sick including me all the time from eating food that hadn't been properly cleaned or stored. People were getting sick from other things, air borne illnesses of various sorts. We had, I think, the largest medical unit the State Department has in any mission overseas. It was such a difficult...getting around, the traffic. In those days there were only two airlines in the country. I learned a new word in India. After we had been there about six weeks and I had gone through this stressful period of cutting the hell out of the USIS operation I said to my family, "Let's go down to Rajasthan to Jaipur for a weekend vacation, just to get out and see a little bit of India." So we flew down there and we had two lovely days exploring the castle, palaces, and Jaipur is a gorgeous high desert city. Our flight was due to go back to Delhi at like one in the afternoon on Sunday afternoon. We showed up at eleven in the morning two hours ahead of time and I noticed that there was nobody in the airport so I walked up to the ticket counter and said, "We are here for our flight." The guy said, "Oh your flight sir has been preponed." I said, "What?" Well, postponed means it's going later, preponed meant the pilot decided to take the God damn plane off at about 9:30 in the morning and just left and flew back to Delhi. We were sitting there and after I got over my shock I said, "Well when can we get to Delhi?" He said, "Oh, the next flight's tomorrow." So we went back to our hotel and I learned a new word, to be preponed. Your flight is preponed sir, your flight is preponed.

Q: Tell me when you got there in '95 how stood relations with India? Of course, by this time the Soviet Union had ceased to exist which had been their great supporter and all. How stood things at the time and how did things develop while you were there?

WILLS: Well I mention that India's economic reform was, when I got there, four years old. It began in 1994 when the country almost went bankrupt, it couldn't pay its bills. That was because of years and years and years of socialist policies; that's why we have so many Americans of Indian decent in our country, because they had no opportunity in their country. They were well educated and they came to our country as doctors and scientists; it was a very poor place and they had all those years of non-alignment. India was one of the leaders of the non-align movement and successive Indian leaders but particularly Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister and his daughter Indira Gandhi, were hostile to us, they didn't like us. There was a kind of a leftist ethos in India even when I got there in '95 even though they had moved toward the free market in '91; it was a very slow movement, India was still a very heavily regulated economy. I think it must be the broadest engagement with any country on the planet earth; there wasn't a single issue in American diplomacy that wasn't in play in India. We would talk to them about nuclear weapons, terrorism, democracy, human rights, international economic issues, trade issues, population issues, health issues, regional security issues, and aids. India has, I think, even with all the aids in southern Africa I think there are more HIV positive people in India than in any other country. So we were engaged on every possible issue with India, whereas in Belgium we really only had an issue or two and they weren't all that serious.

We had forty issues to deal with the Indians about and they were all very serious. The mission was working at a very high level of activity and with a very high level of professionalism. It was one of the largest embassies in the world; I think second largest after Egypt because we had all those AID and military advisers in Egypt. We had, I think, about 400 Americans and 3,000 Indians working in the mission. So it was a huge operation. We had a vehicle fleet in the embassy that must have been a couple hundred vehicles that we ran. So the administrative section of the embassy was a big operation.

Q: Things were obviously changing but how did we find say dealing with the foreign ministry?

WILLS: It was tough. The first forty years of India's independence, as I said, it was a socialist economy and a socialist leftist sort of politics so although there was a public sector and some people got quite rich in the private sector the most prestigious occupation was being an Indian administrative service officer, the IAS. The elite from the best universities in the country wanted to be civil servants. In our country the word civil servant is not a cuss word but it's not a revered occupation in many parts of the United States. In India being an IAS officer or an IFS, Indian Foreign Service Officer, these were the coolest things people could do. With the leftist political ethos in the country even in '95 you would go to the foreign ministry and you would be lectured to about the evils of American diplomacy in this part of the world or that part of the world; so it was difficult. But I kept reminding my staff that I didn't join the Foreign Service to go to a place where everybody agreed with me, I liked having to figure out ways to get the Indians to work with us or at least to tolerate and listen to us. So meanwhile India was reforming economically and more and more people were choosing not to go into the IAS or the IFS. Instead, and it was visible when I was there, the best graduates wanted to join the private sector rather than the government and that trend has accelerated and now it's by far in favor of the private sector but that was not the case when I got there just thirteen years ago. So dealing with the Indian government was difficult. I could talk about my five years in India, Stu, for a week. It was an amazing experience.

I was one of the three embassy officers who were authorized to go to Kashmir where there was then and still is an insurrection. The Pakistani's are supporting the insurrection; it's mainly an Islamic insurrection. The Indians have forces up there trying to maintain public order; Kashmir is gorgeous. It's a Himalayan paradise but in the middle of it all there is this tension and armed check points everywhere, bombings periodically, assassinations so you have this high mountain jewel that is a very unhappy place. The northeast of India is these little states that look like they are really part of Southeast Asia and culturally they are. But, they are part of India and very different from everywhere else. I mean I was so stimulated there and by that point in my career I'd learned five foreign languages. I just didn't have the wherewithal to study Hindi or any of the other languages so I did my best to learn what I could as an English speaker and I managed to read and learn a lot about the country and came away deeply impressed and deeply depressed. You see problems there that would stagger us in the United States. They have to deal with so many issues on a massive scale because there are so many people. When I was there there were one billion, now it's a billion one hundred million. Anything is off the charts. Two percent of the population is HIV positive, that's 25 million people, 25 million people. So even a little bitty percentage of a very big number is a lot of people. So everything there is outsized and, as I said, extreme.

After about a year and a half Frank was getting ready to leave and there were a whole series of negotiations and coincidences and it worked out that I was named DCM and I served with him just a short time in that capacity. Then he left and I was chargï¿½ for almost a year while we waited for a new ambassador to come, seven months I guess a little over a half a year. We had all kinds of exciting events there. Mother Teresa died and the head of the U.S. delegation to pay her respect at her funeral was Hillary Clinton; I spent three days with her.

Q: How was she how did you find her?

WILLS: She's a very smart woman and a very serious person. She wasn't very warm, she and her aides, I thought, were a little too devoted to their own agendas rather than...but I mean she was there as a head of a delegation to a funeral, it wasn't like she was negotiating an agreement with the Indians.

We had all kinds of Congressional delegations. I took Richard Shelby the senator from Alabama...he wanted to go to Kashmir, he was then on the intelligence committee, so we took him up to Kashmir. It was a dicey trip with a U.S. senator in tow. Secretary Albright came out maybe four or five times while I was there as DCM and chargï¿½ so it was a deeply enriching experience as I said earlier professionally.

Q: How did you find the media?

WILLS: The media? Well when I lived in India the illiteracy rate was something like 42 percent, 42 percent that's 500 million people who can't read or write but that leaves 500 million people who can. The number of newspapers was astonishing, in all these languages. The Indian journalists were very well informed; many of them, there were so many newspapers that you had newspapers that were aligned with the 47 different political parties including the Communist. Some of them were just hacks but the free independent media were very, very good and I would say at a world standard; now things are even better. When I got to India in 1995 there was one television station, Doordarshan, the public station, now there are probably fifty television stations. There were like two radio stations in the country and no FM at all; this is thirteen years ago. Now there are hundreds and hundreds of privately owned radio stations and FM stations.

I remember very well shortly after I got there I went to see an old Brahmin leader of the Congress Party and he was giving me yet again a lecture about how we were just wiper-snappers culturally and the Indians were old and wise. He said, "We will not change quickly, Mr. Wills." Well what's happened? India has changed as dramatically as any country on the planet earth in the last thirteen years. It's gone from being unnoticed to being a major force, to say nothing of the horror of the terrorist attacks in Mumbai just last week. But I mean who had ever heard of outsourcing thirteen years ago and now India has been outsourcing capital of the world for lo these many years. It's just growing in unpredictable and astonishing ways.

Q: What was your impression of how the major media reported on the United States in relations with us?

WILLS: Mainly as I said then, not so much now, then there was still a sort of leftist slant. Whereas if you take as a base the United States as kind of a centrist country the center of political discourse in India is what we would call the left wing of the democratic party, that's the center over there. So you would be dealt with critically, suspiciously, they would need to be persuaded that you had any merit in your point of view; that's changed. Now India is moving rightward in a way and the old third world non-aligned nonsense is receding from public discourse. India is not becoming an ally of the United States but it's actually becoming a friend and that began when I was there and we take great pride in that. In 1998 we had an ambassador come out early that year, Dick Celeste, he had been governor of Ohio twice as a Democrat and he had lived in India for two or three years after he completed his Rhodes Scholarship in the UK; he came out to work as a political appointment in the embassy as an aide to the then Ambassador Chester Bowles. Then he went back to the United States and became a prominent politician himself. But he had been governor of Ohio and he was looking for other things to do and he asked Bill Clinton, his old friend, to send him to India as ambassador and Bill Clinton obliged him. He was a terrific ambassador, very, very enthusiastic, smart, very, very able man in a lot of ways. He looked at the world as a professional politician and taught me a lot. I was very glad to have had that association with him.

Anyway, he had come out I think in December of '97 and in May of '98 he was called back to Washington I think it was a chiefs of mission conference. He was there about a week and we woke up one morning and the Indians had exploded three nuclear devices. Our intelligence agencies had completely missed it and, in fact, I learned about it from a call from Washington. So that caused a tremendous amount of excitement, as I'm sure you can imagine, and we ended up imposing sanctions on our relations with the Indians, which were just beginning to improve, suddenly plummeted. A lot of tensions and they thought we were punishing them for the wrong reasons but almost immediately we began to repair the relationship and we did so well that less than two years later Bill Clinton came out on a historic and very positive eight day long visit. Can you imagine having an American president in your country for eight days? It was the most complicated logistical undertaking I'd ever been part of and I was in charge of the visit.

Q: How did it work for you?

WILLS: President Clinton was fascinated by India even then. I don't think he had ever been before as a governor of Arkansas or as a private citizen. He really wanted to come to India and he wanted to see India so we took him...that's why it was so complicated. I think we ended up going to six or seven different cities. You know what it's like when a U.S. president comes; getting him to the capital city is a huge ordeal. This guy wanted to go to several places. Thank goodness we had a large embassy and then we brought in a lot of people from around the world to help us. We probably had 600 journalists who were there for this visit. We had secret service agents probably 200 of them, FBI special agents, God it was an amazing undertaking. Every single moment of his visit had to be negotiated with the Indians; this is where they could be aggravating as hell. I'd been part of four or five presidential visits to other counties where I lived and they were always difficult but when you say to a foreign government the president is coming and here is what he would like to do, most foreign governments will say okay, they won't give you any backchat. The Indians gave us backchat about everything, every little detail, but in the end it was a spectacular success. I even took him to a tiger park down in central India called Ranthambhore and we had a motorcade of twelve vehicles. We were driving through this park and we actually saw three tigers, two adults and a baby. Of course, the international media accused me of creating a Potemkin tiger park saying I'd drugged the tigers so that they would be out there where we could see them. That was not true but I couldn't persuade them. But that was exciting and that came right at the end of my assignment. He came in March of 2000 and I left in June of 2000. So we recovered from that horrible period when we were imposing sanctions and castigating them for exploding those nuclear weapons. I haven't even talked about the numerous times we almost had war with Pakistan and the numerous times we had a hostage situation and we had an American killed in Kashmir. Everyday there was some crisis.

Q: Well how did you deal with the minor manner of Monica Lewinsky?

WILLS: You mean how did we portray that to the Indian media?

Q: That caused quite a...

WILLS: We didn't even make an attempt, that was just out there.

Q: That was just out there and just say well that...

WILLS: We knew he had a wondering eye and we were ready because India is full of everything but it's also full of beautiful women. We thought surely he would notice that and he surely did. But Monica Lewinsky, I mean what can you do about that.

Q: Yeah, well I mean was it all over the papers?

WILLS: Yeah because people liked Clinton even before he came to India, it was known that he had imposed these sanctions with regret. We were obligated under the acts of Congress regarding the nuclear proliferation to do what we did and we didn't have any choice. But Clinton had made some speeches and made it very clear that he thought India was a coming power. People like to think now, so short are our historic memories, that the rapprochement with India began with George Bush, that's complete nonsense; it began under Bill Clinton. Bush continued it and has done a lot of great things but he didn't start it, it started with Bill Clinton who for all his shortcomings was far sighted.

Q: Did you get any feel for the Indian perspective and relationship with China during this time because China was obviously an economic power who was on its way up?

WILLS: You know what was remarkable then, Stu, was they knew hardly anything about each other and had hardly any contact. You may remember, or perhaps you don't, that when the Indians exploded those nuclear bombs we asked them why, why did they do that? They said because of the threat form China, not Pakistan, which everybody thought, was really the reason. So I sent out a bunch of political officers all over the country to find out exactly what India knew about China, think tanks, universities, and the foreign ministry. We could hardly find a soul who knew anything about China. I mean in the foreign ministry there were a few people who had served there at the Indian embassy. There were a couple people who spoke Chinese because they were professors of the language at Jawaharlal Nehru University of Delhi. But what was remarkable was that these two countries that fought a war in 1962, a border war, and were the two biggest countries in Asia and the two biggest put together they make up a fourth of humanity or more than a fourth of humanity together over two billion, how many of us are there? Seven billion or something like that. So 25 percent of humanity didn't really have much to do with one another. I remember we checked and in 1997 they had had like maybe $40 million in trade, $40 million? Today the figure is $40 billion. Now they are beginning to deal with one another but in 1998 they had hardly any contact since the war in '62.

Q: How did you find American business dealing with India during this time?

WILLS: American business?

Q: Yeah.

WILLS: Well, there was a lot of excitement in the business community because the market was so huge, which had been closed to us lo those many years since independence or essentially closed. We had very little U.S. investment and very little business interest until they began to open up in '91; then companies came in. India needed power so there were all kinds of power contracts that were signed. You might remember the ENRON deal. One of their first big international investments was at a power plant in Maharashtra State in western India. There were others too all over the country; power projects, GE (General Electric) came in. When I got to India in 1995 GE had I think it was under 100 employees and today I think it has 50,000. But the remarkable thing about American business activity in the five years I lived there was they all had this hope that it would work out brilliantly and the market would be a rich one; but they all suffered. The India bureaucracy, as I said, was still strong and it got in the way. All these power projects very few of them actually were ever built although agreements were signed and everything because if the Indian national level bureaucracy didn't get in the way a state level bureaucracy would. So it was really hard to do business in India. I felt a tremendous sympathy for the business executives who came out there to give it a go again because it was tough living. We had an embassy administrative section that we could rely on for services. If you were there as a business executive and had to rely on Indian power, Indian telephones, Indian this and Indian that it would drive you crazy. So it was really tough. Now again, things have improved tremendously in the last several years.

Q: You left there in what? 2000?

WILLS: I left there in 2000 and the previous...what do you want to do? Do you want me to start on Sri Lanka?

Q: Do you think maybe we just do Sri...what happens after Sri Lanka?

WILLS: I come back here as assistant U.S. trade representative and then I retire.

Q: Maybe it would be best to stop now I think and we will pick this up so we can...

WILLS: Finish up and then we will have only one more session?

Q: Yeah, one more session should do it.

WILLS: Suits me.

Q: Okay, today is the 18th of December 2008 with Ashley Wills. Ashley, we are talking about your going to is it Sri Lanka?

WILLS: Right, I ended my tour in India in 2000 and came back for actually several months as it turned out although my confirmation hearing went fine there was a problem with senior officers in the State Department accumulating security clearance problems or security violations and there for about two months everybody's nomination was held up. I had only three violations in my career so I was okay but some others in my group of ambassadors to be had more and they were harassed. They all ended up going to post as planned but it took several of them quite a while to get cleared by the relevant committees of Congress. Although we left India in late June, I think it was, we didn't actually go to post until October of 2000.

Q: You were there until 2003?

WILLS: Yes, I was there three years as are most ambassadorial assignments.

Q: Had you been to Sri Lanka before?

WILLS: No, I'd never been there. Becoming an ambassador is such a matter of luck and I was very lucky. Originally I was asked whether I would like to be one and what post would I be interested in from a list that was sent out. I had originally...this was a year and a half or so before I ended my tour in India and I chose Romania, which had been my first post. My wife was actually excited about going back to Romania but the guy whom Clinton had appointed and who was coming up on the end of his tour petitioned President Clinton to stay a fourth year, he was a Democrat from the state of Maryland, so it remained political and he stayed a fourth year.

Of the other posts that were available I selected Sri Lanka. I hadn't been there but having lived in India for five years I certainly knew about it and it didn't disappoint me, it was a fabulously beautiful country. But when I got there it looked like Havana, although I've never been to Havana, it looked like what I imagine Havana to look like in that there were security check points every couple of hundred yards on every major road; this was because of the civil conflict going on between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which had used as a tactic, in fact it developed the tactic, of suicide bombing with a vest that people would wear under their loose-fitting South Asian clothing. They would walk up to the target and blow themselves up so the government of Sri Lanka at the time, there had been quite a rash of bombings just before I got to post. So it really looked grim despite being a tropical paradise. People would walk around with their shoulders sloped down and their heads down almost as if they were expecting a sudden blow; it was really depressing.

Before I went out there I'd talked to the then assistant secretary and every other person concerned with Sri Lanka in the government. I didn't really get any guidance about what to do as ambassador, what the goals of U.S. diplomacy ought to be. Everybody was focused on India and Pakistan and the Sri Lankan civil war seemed peripheral so people said go out there and do the best you can and keep us posted; that was the extent of my diplomatic guidance. When I got out there I decided this place is golden, it's a beautiful place, these people were delightful and I'd had a lot of experience in my career with people who could be perfectly sane and world class on any subject but politics when they would become unenlightened and bigoted even, South Africa, Yugoslavia, two cases in point. India and Pakistan both could be that way about each other so I decided right away that I knew that we would never send U.S. troops to Sri Lanka but they didn't know that. So I decided that we would be somewhat more aggressive than ever before in promoting a peaceful end of the conflict. While we would continue to condemn the LTTE which had been put on our terrorism list just a couple of years earlier we would show a lot of sympathy for the Tamil people who were suffering and who had been discriminated against for decades but also show support for the government to the extent it was trying to do the right thing. I was helped by a couple of things.

One was the arrival at about the same time of an Indian high commissioner to Sri Lanka, the Indian ambassador to Sri Lanka who was an old friend of mine from Delhi days. His name was Gopal Gandhi, he was the grandson of the Mahatma Gandhi and he had been chief of staff for the president of India when I was in India; I saw him all the time and we became friends there and here we were assigned to Sri Lanka at the same time. That was pivotal because the Indians had never wanted any outside power to have a role in bringing about peace in any South Asian country; this was their area, they had their own sort of Monroe Doctrine where South Asia was concerned. But I knew that if I worked with Gopal Gandhi I could perhaps venture a little farther out than had been possible in the past.

Q: Ashley, while you were in India had you picked up from the Indians you know they had put their troops in and they tried to do something say don't touch that place, sort of a...

WILLS: I became very aware; yes I talked to several people who had been instrumental in the decision to send Indian troops into Sri Lanka in the '80s. I had talked with the head of the India security agency at the time of that decision, by Rajiv Gandhi, who was then prime minister of India back in what '87, '88, and with the other major figures in the foreign ministry and in the military. I quickly learned that the Sri Lankan situation was a very sore subject for the Indians and a divisive topic but that many Indian officials were not sympathetic with the Tigers even leading figures in Tamil Nadu in the south. Tamils, for the most part were not sympathetic with the LTTE but they were sympathetic with the people of Sri Lanka who had been discriminated against, Tamil people; but they didn't want to have anything to do with it any more because of that incursion in the 80's had been so unsuccessful and led to the deaths of, I think about, 1,500 Indian troops. So I knew that the Indians wouldn't be making major commitments but they could screw up any efforts that we wanted to make. So I wanted to keep them well briefed so they would let us have some leeway.

The other key development was that the Norwegians had an excellent ambassador; he's now the Norwegian ambassador to India, as a matter of fact. He and I hit it off really well and reached an agreement informally that I would take a more outspoken public position on the war and he would offer Norway's good offices to bring about a ceasefire with the understanding that we were backing him up silently; that's exactly what happened. We spent about a year, I made lots of speeches. I mean an American ambassador in a country like that can make himself into a rock star pretty quickly.

Q: Why?

WILLS: Because everybody knows that we are the alpha male, we are the silverback gorilla internationally; so they want to know what we think. One has to be careful, obviously we are diplomats, we can't be agitators but one can use speeches, one can get the media involved and know that a major speech is coming or that a press interview is possible and make points that get attention. I was able to do that and John was able to move diplomatically between the LTTE and the government of Sri Lanka; we, of course, could not have any contact with the LTTE. But I communicated with them publicly through speeches and press interviews. Anyway through a variety of interventions and there were dozens of developments in this period that I could tell you about but won't. Eventually the forces lined up right. There are a couple of things that I should mention.

Sri Lanka has a very unusual political set up. It is very much like the French one in that there is a prime minister and a president and they are not necessarily from the same party. When I got there they were. The president was a woman named Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga; she was herself the daughter of two former prime ministers of Sri Lanka. She had almost been killed by one of these suicide bombers just a few months before I got there and lost an eye, in fact. She was the heir to a distinguished dynastic political family.

Her adversary, the leader of the opposition, was a guy by the name of Ranil Wickremesinghe, who was also the heir of another dynastic political family. They had been rivals for decades. He was in many ways a very unusual politician, he's very effete and almost feminine and yet deep down inside he's a pretty courageous guy. He was willing to say things that lined up pretty much with what the Norwegian's and we and others who cared about Sri Lanka from outside wanted to be said. He said he was for negotiations not a war, he wanted to emphasize the private sector in Sri Lanka's economic growth like a lot of South Asian countries, although it had always had a private sector, it had been mainly socialist. He wanted to open it up to free market ideas. So we were drawn to him and he to us and lo and behold he moved a vote of no confidence in parliament against the prime minister who was from President Kumaratunga's party. There was an election and he won, this was about eight months after I had got there or not even, a few months after I got there, five months. So he became prime minister, formed a government and he and the president were at odds from the start. But he persevered and used the Norwegians and the Indians and us to communicate his intentions to the LTTE and through a long series of negotiations, very quiet negotiations a cease-fire was arranged, the first ever in this civil war. Simultaneously he was moving to privatize a lot of government services and open up the economy. There was a transformation in Sri Lanka. What I had found when I got there was an armed encampment and one saw literally and figuratively, as well, the lifting of all these security barriers, they were moved away and the city opened up. Commerce began to thrive again and there was a lot of construction, touristic infrastructure was being built, the country's exports were booming; things just began to look much better for Sri Lanka. The LTTE and the government of Sri Lanka under Ranil, brokered by the Norwegians out front and us behind the scenes, began to negotiate some sort of outcome to the civil war. Meanwhile, President Kumaratunga, a very virtuous person in many ways, I liked her very much, but she was jealous that he was getting all this credit internationally.

Another development that I should mention here is we had an election in this country and Colin Powell and Rich Armitage took over the State Department and whereas before as I mentioned the previous administration focused on India and to a lesser extent Pakistan. These two gentlemen kept a great deal of focus on those two countries but they were drawn to the situation in Sri Lanka. They admired what the government was trying to do; they liked our reporting. I had an excellent staff of people who were deeply involved in this effort. We tried very hard to engage everybody in the embassy and give them something to do that would serve this larger purpose that we'd set for ourselves. In fact, within a week of my arriving at post I called everybody together in the embassy for an off-site at my residence and we talked through what is it we were going to try and do here in this country. How are we going to make American diplomacy relevant here? Washington is giving us leeway for whatever reason and so let's use it to be imaginative. We set some of these goals mainly dealing with helping bring about a cease-fire and the end of the war but also we had a lot of economic goals and public affairs goals. We had a small USAID mission; I was told when I was getting ready to come to Sri Lanka that it was going to close down, the small mission there, and I said, "That's not going to happen, we are going to expand our aid there." And indeed we did. AID was impressed with what we were trying to do so they sent in a very dynamic woman to be the AID director and gave her three or four times the budget that the previous AID director had had.

So it was a time of a growing mission, a very happy mission I believe and a very productive one, but there were things that got in our way. The rivalry between the president and the prime minister was the major obstacle. He couldn't stand briefing her on what he was doing with the LTTE through the Norwegians. He couldn't bring himself to brief her; she couldn't bring herself to let it happen even though she herself supported what he was doing or believed in the same goals that he did. That he, this rival, was pulling this off after she had failed to do it made her really upset. She was working to undermine him and in the end shortly after I left in 2003 she did a deal with the devil. Without going into a lot of detail about Sri Lankan politics there was a party called the JVP that was made up of Singhalese nationalists. Only in South Asia have I found anywhere in the world left wing nationalist parties and these guys were Maoists more or less but tremendously nationalistic, tremendously hostile to the Tamils and trouble makers and not people of vision. I remember once that I was on a TV program, a debate with one of the leaders of this party and he spent the whole hour of the show attacking me and the United States for our various sins internationally. I was my diplomatic self and responded as calmly as I could to his outrageous charges. I got a little more forceful as the charges got more outrageous and finally near the need of the debate I turned to him and said, "Now you've been so quick to criticize capitalism and what the role of the United States has been internationally, exactly what would your model of economic development be? Which countries around the world do you admire? Which countries have made a success of it in your view?" He stuck his nose in the air and very proudly said, "Cuba." I broke out laughing on Sri Lankan national television and basically said to the guy, "You're a comedian if you think that's a success story, that's the last thing that I would call it." Well Kumaratunga who was by nature a tolerant, completely unbigoted person was so jealous of the prime minister that a few months after I left she went into an alliance with this racist party, left wing racist party, and moved a vote of no confidence in Parliament and by the way this happened while Ranil was in the United States meeting with President Bush for the second time. I'd arranged the first meeting while I was ambassador, my successor arranged the second meeting. I was at this point already at USTR and we were beginning to think about doing a Free Trade Agreement, the first one with any South Asian nation, with Sri Lanka which was reforming in all these important ways politically and economically. So he was getting all this international press. While he was in the White House not quite literally I think he was at his hotel here in Washington, she moved a no confidence vote and there was an election and because of this alliance she had she and this JVP party won and the peace effort, such as it was, it had already started to falter a bit for other reasons, was dead. What has happened since then, that was in 2004 I guess, the whole country has returned to war and fighting and it's a very unhappy situation. But there for a while from 2001 until late 2003 things began to look up in Sri Lanka.

Armitage especially paid careful attention. He came out to visit at least once, I think, maybe twice. I took him up to Jaffna, which is the cultural home of the Tamil's and where a lot of the fighting has occurred. As an ex-military officer himself he understood the dynamics of the campaign militarily and the cease-fire that was then pending and later it happened. So we had a high level audience in Washington, things went really well and I felt good about what we had done when I left in 2003. Through this unfortunate series of developments it's all been reversed and I'm left to wonder whether what I really did mattered.

Q: Well, you made the effort but in the first place what were the Tamil Tigers and this Tamil movement, what were they after?

WILLS: They wanted a separate state carved out of...well some of them wanted to go even beyond Sri Lanka; they wanted to incorporate the north and the east of Sri Lanka and Tamil speaking areas of India, which would be highly unpopular.

Q: The Tamil's speaking in the first place did they have much support in India in the Tamil speaking?

WILLS: They have some but not a lot. I mean their approximate goal, the one they maintained for years, is they wanted to create a Tamil Eelam, a Tamil homeland, an independent state out of Sri Lanka's north and east. The more radical Tamil thinkers in the LTTE and in the Tamil Diaspora internationally wanted to unite all Tamil speakers; there are Tamil speaking communities in Malaysia and Singapore, but that's all dreamy stuff. The real goal is to take Sri Lanka, about a third of it, and make it into an independent state. Nobody internationally, least of all India and the United States, supports this idea, it's preposterous. It's a small country to begin with, about the size of the state of Maryland, and to take a third of it and give it to an ethnic group first of all, I mean there are all kinds of reasons why it's a bad idea but no one has taken it seriously. The tactics used by the Tigers, as I mentioned earlier, have been deemed to be terroristic and so the group...it's never really attacked American interests but it was a Tiger suicide bomber who blew up Rajiv Gandhi because of that Indian intervention in the '80sand the desire to get revenge against this man. So they have attacked international figures but they've never really attacked the United States; I mean there have been American's wounded in bombings that were aimed at other targets. The day after I arrived in Sri Lanka there was a suicide bomber detected while he was making his way to some target but no one ever knew what that was and the police started chasing him. He ran out into the middle of an intersection in a commercial area of Colombo and detonated himself. It so happened that there was a brand new Toyota Land Cruiser sitting at a traffic signal waiting for the green light in that very intersection and in it were three wives of American AID contractors. They were hurt, one of them pretty seriously although she recovered eventually. When I heard about that, of course, I went to the hospital where they all three were. As I went into the hospital, the cops showed me the vehicle that they had been in which had been carried to the hospital on a flatbed truck. There must have been 200 holes that size where the ball bearings that this bomber had packed into his vest, had gone through the sheet metal of the vehicle and it was a miracle to me that the three of them and their driver hadn't been killed. The three of them, as I say, were injured and so was the driver but he wasn't, surprisingly, all that hurt. So there have been Americans injured but no targeting of American interests or of any other foreign interest other than this attack on Rajiv Gandhi, but still it's a terrorist group and we've deplored their tactics while, as I said, having sympathy for their situation, for the Tamil people's situation.

There is no question that since just a few years after Sri Lankan independence, since the early '50s say, successive governments of Sri Lanka from then until the '80s enacted laws that discriminated against Tamil's. The Sinhala people who form the majority of the country and whose interest were favored by these discriminatory laws would be quick to tell you that the reason for this is because in the days of British colonialism, this is so true of the British around the world, they would come in and pick out a favored minority to help them administer a colony. In the case of Sri Lanka, the Tamils were the minority that the British chose. So Tamil's were way over represented in the colonial period in the professions, in the civil service and business. And the Sinhala who were the majority in the country found their language repressed and their culture; so all of these laws since independence, they would say, were putting things right after so many years of their facing discrimination. Of course, our view of that was you don't make it right by passing mean spirited laws; you are in this island together. This is the point I've tried to make to the Tamil's when I would try to speak privately or in public. Not only is there no Tamil Eelam in this country there is no part of this country that should be reserved for any particular ethnic group; the whole island is a mix. There are more ethnic groups and not just those two groups. There is a big Muslim population for example, and smaller populations of other ethnic groups. So to divide up a country ethnically is as mistaken as dividing it along other grounds.

Q: Well here you are the American ambassador meddling in Sri Lankan affairs.

WILLS: Yeah.

Q: How did you get away with it?

WILLS: Because of our stature internationally, both sides wanted our approval, both sides wanted the conflict in a way to be internationalized not in a military sense but in a moral sense and a political sense. They wanted the international community's approval for their views. An American ambassador, as I said, I mean saying that I was a rock star trivializes it. It was that of all the ambassadors in Sri Lanka there were only two who were seen to be pivotal figures in the country's public discourse, the Indian High Commissioner and the American ambassador. Even the British High Commissioner didn't have anything close to that status. So because of our record on human rights, because of our support for human rights, because we had tried to mediate on so many other disputes around the world they gave us a hearing that they wouldn't give a lot of people. Now mind you Sri Lanka was a free society, they had free press and there were many Sri Lankan commentators who didn't like what I was doing and said so. But for the most part we were given a lot of leeway.

Q: Well in a case like this I mean I realize you are under constraints of talking to the Tamil Tigers I mean...

WILLS: Couldn't do it.

Q: ...you couldn't do it. You had to be able to I mean I don't want to...

WILLS: That's why I was using John as the Norwegian ambassador to communicate; I never sent a message directly to the Tigers. They sent a few to me through interlocutors but I was able to get my message such as it was to them through public means. I went up one time and gave a major speech in Jaffna, right in the middle of their territory, and the whole speech was aimed at the LTTE but it was a speech, not a diplomatic message.

Q: Was anybody telling you from Washington to cool it?

WILLS: No, Armitage became the Sri Lankan desk officer in effect back in Washington and he, as I say, admired what we were trying to do because it was in line with what he and Secretary Powell were trying to do elsewhere in South Asia, where there were many ethnic conflicts and in other parts of the world. They were looking for a success story where they could show the world that it is possible to reach an accommodation without military conflict. I think they were hoping that Sri Lanka could be an example for India and Pakistan for example, or for Nepal, which had its own civil conflict at the time to say nothing of other countries around the world. So that I think was the reason for their interest in this little place that most secretaries of State and deputy secretaries of State wouldn't pay very much attention to. They had an investment in it for that reason I think. Our national interests in Sri Lanka are minimal, we have no commercial interests really. I mean we have some interest and I'm happy to say we increased our exports quite a lot; we devoted quite a lot of attention to that. We have a humanitarian interest in seeing the end of the conflict. We have a political interest in seeing a democracy strengthen, solidify, made broader but nothing really I mean no vital U.S. interest. So why pay attention t o Sri Lanka? Because of what it might symbolize for a world filled with ethnic conflict and there for a while we had hopes running high. Deputy Secretary Armitage took part in a multilateral donors group that we created to transfer tremendous amounts of aid to Sri Lanka if the peace could be sustained, if this ceasefire could be sustained. I mean he devoted, bless his heart, and he and I didn't necessarily get along all that well but he saluted what we were trying to do and I, of course, saluted him for taking an interest and he really did. He must have devoted more time and attention to Sri Lanka per capita, than any other issue he was dealing with in the State Department; it was amazing. Then it all came unstuck, as I say, in early 2004 he was dispirited as were the rest of us. I feel a deep sense of disappointment about what happened.

But let me make one other observation here. I mentioned earlier that President Kumaratunga aligned herself with these left wing racists for political gain and to insure Ranil Wickremesinghe's political loss. But there were other things that were working against him and the ceasefire. The LTTE in these talks proved to be obstinate and really not negotiable. The leader, a guy named Prabhakaran, gave the impression that he would forsake the idea of an independent Tamil Eelam if he got very substantial autonomy over the region that he wanted to control. Well that would have been a delicate negotiation in the best of circumstances. In these circumstances Wickremesinghe who was facing all this chatter from his opposition down south really couldn't cede to Prabhakaran so much autonomy. He wanted to be clear that this region was still part of Sri Lanka and that it wouldn't have its own military and it wouldn't have it's own currency. It could have its own courts and many other instruments of power. There was no question that Wickremesinghe was prepared to give the Tamil's a great deal of autonomy but Prabhakaran wanted more. So the talks were really faltering by the time that I left. It was, I think, mainly a reflection of the political instability in the south between these rival groups and Prabhakaran's intransigence. So there were other reasons why things fell apart than just the jealousy that President Kumaratunga felt.

Q: How did you find your embassy work as a team?

WILLS: I think pretty well. We had a very bright and talented DCM, a guy I had never met before. I selected him after talking to several people who had worked for him. I wanted a DCM who could inspire the confidence of his subordinates, having just been a DCM myself. I talked to several of them and they all admired this guy, his name is Lewis Amselem. He'd spent almost all his career in South America, although maybe he had one tour in Pakistan early in his career so he had some South Asian experience. He was a very good DCM, an excellent reporting officer, good writer, good listener and we made special efforts to motivate every section in the embassy; we tried to make it plain that everybody had a central role. It wasn't a big embassy we only had about forty some Americans or something like that and maybe 300 Sri Lankans. But we had success in getting people to think about this as a group, as a team enterprise. I also emphasized that I wanted everybody out and about traveling. Sri Lanka is, have you been there? It is a gorgeous country. There is a place in Sri Lanka if I had to pick one place on earth that I've seen that could have been Eden there is this one part of Sri Lanka that would have qualified. It's very rich history, unbelievable archeological relics, abandoned cities in the jungle, great wildlife, surprisingly high mountains although it's tropical around Colombo and almost all of the country. There is a part of the island that has got very high mountains and a quite cool climate. It would be a fabulous touristic destination if it had peace everywhere; even without peace there are a lot of people who go there. Most of the country is safe for tourism even now but in the meantime, it got whacked by the tsunami and the place is just suffering inordinately. It's got many more than it's fair share of problems. But anyway my wife made it plain there was some talk about my going somewhere else from Sri Lanka but by that point we had been overseas for 15 straight years.

Q: Yeah.

WILLS: And our kids, our older child had just graduated from college and our younger one was in college and here we were at the ends of the earth. So I talked it over with my wife and decided we needed to come home and being an ambassador once was a great honor and I didn't want to be one again. So I came back here and I began to think about what I wanted to do back here that I would try to find something that would make it easier for me to jump to the private sector. I didn't want to retire utterly; I wanted to do something for a few years in the private world. I heard that the USTR at the time, Bob Zoellick, was looking to establish an assistant USTR office dealing with South Asia; there had never been one before. So he and I got in touch with one another and he ended up hiring me to do that job. That was how I ended my career.

I came back and joined Zoellick's staff at USTR as an Assistant Trade Representative and I dealt with trade issues dealing in Southwest Asia as well. He gave me Afghanistan and Iraq to deal with as well so I traveled to both those countries just after the war. We were trying to help those two countries set up trade regime laws that would permit further trade than they've had in the case of Iraq under Saddam and in the case of Afghanistan under the Taliban. So we were helping them write trade laws. There were huge number of trade disputes with India so for those two and a half years that I was there I learned a lot and got to do more negotiating than I'd ever done in my career really.

Meanwhile I began to look around for something to do outside of the Foreign Service and that's how I ended up being offered a job with this law firm where I am now.

Q: Well this time working with the Office of Trade Representative. How did particularly Afghanistan and Iraq...I mean was there anything to deal with there?

WILLS: No, and that was one of the problems. Let me take Iraq first. I went there first in 2003 or maybe early 2004. The commerce ministry under Saddam had been the largest employer in the country. It controlled just about everything. Yet it did nothing that a classic commerce ministry does; it didn't have trade regulations, it didn't have intellectual property regulations, it didn't have a clear set of tariffs for the country because so much of the economy depended on oil; other stuff was just not really emphasized. The two times I went there it was clear those were the early days of the redevelopment of civilian infrastructure after our military action. I came away with a sense of hopelessness; the insecurity was already beginning to be obvious. The lack of any other economic activities apart from oil related industries made it difficult. We were trying to attract foreign investment into Iraq; people, not only American executives, but German, French, British executives were put off by the insecurity and by the lack of any regulations or laws within which they could operate so we were have a hell of a time getting things going by the time I'd left the government.

In the case of Afghanistan, it was a much better situation at that time, in 2004-2005 in so far as security was concerned and there were lots of ex-pat Afghans who came back and wanted to set up businesses. There was some activity but there was no cadre of civil servants, there was no one to administer the country, the courts, the police to say nothing of the commerce ministry in the parts of the government that would regulate business. The central bank was weak. There was nobody to do the work; it was bereft of trained cadre. After my first visit it was very clear that Afghanistan needed universities to be established and civil service training institutes and AID to its credit began to turn its attention in those directions. But the problem there was a lack of qualified people. Iraq had the qualified people but it didn't have any place for them to go, any place for them to work.

Q: I've been interviewing Robin Raphel talking about dealing with it sort of in Iraq and all and the degree of problems. What about the Indians? This is about the time India was really making a turn around wasn't it?

WILLS: Well that began actually in the early '90s but it began to really accelerate early this decade around 2000. They had opened up in '91 out of necessity and they began to move with greater and greater enthusiasm as the decade of the '90s went on. By the year 2000 the Indian economy was really beginning to grow and yet the Indians have always had this tendency to be obstructionists whether it's in their interest or not. They would get in the way of their own prosperity sometimes and be very negative in international trade discussions. They have a tendency like a lot of countries that have gone through decades of extreme poverty to want other countries to open up to their goods but not to open up themselves; so it's very one sided, one might even call it mercantilist. But that's changing; they are beginning to open up their economy. We are selling many more goods now than ever before; our trade was at pitiable levels in the '90s, a few billion a year, three or four, five billion; now it's at 50 some billion. It is still small by comparison with our China trade but in percentage terms India is, I think, our fastest growing foreign market; so they are opening up and that's been good to see.

Q: Well then just to finish up what have you been doing? You are working for what a law firm?

WILLS: Yeah, a law firm called WilmerHale, it's really an international law firm although the headquarters are, well, we have two: Boston and here. It used to be two big law firms Wilmer, Cutler, Pickering here and Hale and Dorr in Boston but those two firms merged and became WilmerHale a few years ago. WilmerHale's international and trade department had had a lot of success in doing business in China in the first few years of this decade and began to notice this Indian growth that you mentioned and decided they needed somebody who knew something about India to help clients who had problems in India and that's why I was hired and that is what I do. I try to help companies get into India if they've not been there before or if they are already there and are having problems then we try to help them solve their problems whatever they might be, regulatory, political, what's called due diligence checking out Indian businesses for foreign investors who are thinking about putting money into them. Lately, we've been doing more business with Indian companies coming this way. There are more and more Indian companies wanting to invest in the U.S. so they've come to us to help them solve problem here with our government, regulatory problems that are caused by U.S. laws and so forth; so that's what I do. The pay is better than in the government, the job satisfaction is not nearly what it was in the Foreign Service so I feel a little wistful about the Foreign Service. I don't miss the State Department in many ways, I don't want to go back into the business but I loved the team work, the sense of mission, people whined throughout my career about our low pay; I always felt that we were pretty well paid so I didn't mind.

Q: Yeah, if money turns you on it's a problem.

WILLS: Yeah, so I had a great time. I mean I've talked to some JO classes here and they ask...

Q: Junior Officer classes.

WILLS: ...junior officer classes and they ask me sometimes, in effect, what does it take to succeed in the Foreign Service. My response is one needs a sense of adventure and romance, an abiding patriotism, not a rah rah sort of patriotism and a belief that the country you represent mainly does good things, and a sense of humor.

Q: Yep.

WILLS: Because if you can't laugh at what goes on in the Department of State or what goes on in foreign countries where you are living then you have a serious problem.

Q: Okay, Ashley I think this is a good place to stop.

WILLS: Yeah.

End of interview